



# ARTICLE 2

Written by [Muppetz](#)

- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
- Princess Celestia
- Princess Luna
- Original Character
- Main 6
- Cutie Mark Crusaders
- Adventure
- Comedy
- Human
- Tragedy

## Description

The Princesses find an alien creature barely clinging to life at the scene of a terrifying crash. Can the Combined Power of the Elements of Harmony save it, or more importantly, should they save it? Will the arrival of this strange creature tear Equestria apart?

TV Tropes

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/Article2>

# Table of Contents

- [ARTICLE 2 Part I](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part II](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part III](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part IV](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part V](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part VI](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part VII](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part VIII](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part IX](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part X](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XI](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XII](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XIII](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XIV](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XV](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XVI](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 part XVII](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XVIII](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XIX](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XX](#)
- [ARTICLE 2 Part XXI](#)

# ARTICLE 2 Part I

## ARTICLE 2

By: Muppetz (!Gsih3Wfnlk)

Celestia paced back and forth in her chamber, reviewing a chart levitating a few inches from her nose. Her brow furrowed, as if she were unsatisfied with its contents. She finally threw the clipboard down on her desk, a little more forcefully than she had intended, knocking off a folder, labeled “TOP SECRET- TIER 1”. It fell to the floor and spilled several photographs.

Celestia let out a tired sigh and her shoulders sagged. She was grateful for the privacy she enjoyed while in her own quarters, it allowed her to loosen up a bit, or in this case, vent her obvious frustration. She began to telekinetically scoop up the pictures one by one, taking another hard look at each one before placing them back in their folder. Scenes of twisted, burning metal and scorched earth displayed themselves on the tiny square photos.

One particular image confused Celestia. It was a large charred piece of steel with the markings, “R-V38-X-540” and the flag of a nation that didn’t exist. She contemplated it a bit before it floated past her and settled itself in its place back in the folder. More photos floated past her eyes, ones even she had difficulty looking at. Images littered with torn flesh, eyes staring lifelessly into the distance, limbs stuck in awkward angles. She desired to simply put these photos away but she forced herself to examine them, scouring them for any sign of what could have caused this. Another photo raised itself to her. Almost a dozen corpses all stretched out in a row, covered by white, bloodstained sheets.

She placed the rest of the photos in the folder, save for one, and set the folder back on her desk. She let out an exhausted sigh. She technically didn’t need sleep, but she often found it helped her function more efficiently, and she had gone without it for almost a week. She re-examined the chart for the tenth time hoping that

there was something, anything, she may have missed. “No notable progress.” She stared at the words, wishing they would change, but they remained quite the same. She raised the one remaining photograph, arguably the most important photograph, and inspected it. It was a hospital room. The patient in the bed was covered in tubes and wires, hardly identifiable underneath all the bandages that encased it. Celestia did not know what to make of it; she only knew one thing for sure...It *wasn't* from here.

~~~~~

Twilight hustled about her library late at night, darting from shelf to shelf, with a near panicked fervor. She plucked random books from shelves before dropping them into a large luggage case. A young purple dragon tried desperately to calm the young mare, but she paid him little to no mind, continuing to dash about the building.

“Twilight you have to chill out! You’re going to give yourself an aneurysm. I mean it’s probably nothing, maybe she just wants to talk or catch up or something.” He said, trying to block the pony from her bookshelves. He was wrapped in an aura of purple magic and whisked out of the way, as if he were nothing more than a cobweb.

“Spike! You read the letter. You know the Princes wouldn’t ask something like this unless it was an absolute emergency!” She replied, still dashing around gathering up books, carefully selecting which could be most useful given the Princess’ rather vague letter.

“It might just be a casual visit.” Said Spike, still trying futilely to get Twilight to calm herself. She shot him a narrow gaze before whipping out a letter marked with the royal seal.

“My dearest and most faithful student Twilight,” She began as Spike rolled his eyes. “It is with a heavy heart that I write at this time, for I fear that, once again, Equestria is in dire need of your assistance. I’m afraid that I must ask you and the other Elements to please join me in the capital. I understand that this is quite a lot to ask of you and your friends, but I am afraid that I am left with little choice. I apologize, but I am unable to tell you *why* you must make this trip.

However I assure you, it is a delicate matter which requires the up-most secrecy. It was my wish not to entangle you or your friends in such affairs but I have run out of options. I am sending my own elite personal guard to come collect you and your friends in the morning. Please be ready, as your expediency in this matter is paramount. Signed, Princess Celestia of Equestria.” She finished, and turned to Spike. “Does that sound like a *casual visit* to you?!”

“...no.” Spike knew he had been beat. “but you still need to slow down. You only have a few hours before sunrise, and exhausting yourself doesn’t do you OR the princess any good.” This line of reasoning seemed to have more effect.

“Uhg! I know!” Twilight cried, as she plopped herself down in the middle of the room. “But what am I supposed to do? She didn’t tell me what she needs us for. We could be doing anything, so I need to be ready for *anything*.”

“Twilight, You and I both know you have read and re-read every book in this library at least three times. You’re the most powerful and talented unicorn I have ever met in my entire life,” Twilight brightened a bit. “And you have the most dedicated friends in all of Equestria backing you up. If anypony can handle Celestia’s problem, it’s you.” Twilight smiled and picked herself up, walking over to Spike.

“Thanks Spike,” She said, wrapping a foreleg around him in a tight hug. “You really are my #1 assistant.”

“That’s what I’m here for sister.” He said confidently. “Now go get some sleep. I’ll clean up this mess.”

“Thanks Spike, I don’t know what I’d do without you.” She made her way to the stairs which led to her bedroom, and Spike began picking up books off the floor and tossing them up to the ceiling, where they were snatched out of mid air by a large brown barn owl, who then deposited them in their proper places.

Twilight settled down into her bed, but as hard as she tried, she couldn’t seem to keep her eyes closed. Too many unanswered questions floated around her head. She hoped that she wasn’t the

only one having trouble sleeping. Most of her friends had been present when the letter arrived, and from their reactions, were just as confused and frightened by the possibilities as she was.

Applejack had been the first to excuse herself, saying she needed to alert her family and make preparations for her absence from the farm, which, not surprisingly, seemed to be her biggest concern about the whole situation, along with the need to inform Fluttershy who would, undoubtedly, be terrified at the prospect.

Rarity quickly followed suit, musing aloud about what in the world she was going to wear, whether or not to pack this or that, if she would get the opportunity to mingle with the royals and if so which formal dress she should pack.

Rainbow Dash seemed all too excited about the “mission” as she kept calling it. She kept raving, “This is so AWESOME! I’ll bet the princess is going to send us on some super dangerous deadly covert operation, where we’ll hold the fate of the world in our hooves! *“Special Agent Dash,”* She repeated to herself a few times. “Man that sounds SO COOL! I wonder if we’ll get to go undercover. Maybe were going to Stalliongrad! You know? To like, be spies?” Dash kept on that path for a good 5 minutes, imagining every possible, albeit improbable, scenario that her polychromatic head could envision. She eventually sped off for her cloud home, saying she needed to get ready, along with Pinkie Pie who seemed all too concerned about which particular brand of sweets would be the most well received in Canterlot.

Twilight lay in her bed, wishing desperately for sleep to come to her. She let her eyes wander out her window. Luna’s namesake was high in the night sky. The moon never failed to calm Twilight. It cast its soft glow on the trees and roof tops, giving everything a silver-blue highlight. The stars twinkled around the moon, accenting the orb perfectly. A beam of moonlight from the window cast itself on Twilight’s bed, and her lids soon began getting rather heavy. Eventually the yawns got the best of her and she drifted into a deep sleep.

~~~~~

Twilight paced back and forth in front of her library, occasionally stopping to open up a large piece of luggage to check its contents, as if to make sure they had not disappeared. Rainbow dash was napping on the grass, her colorful head resting on the rather small bag she had packed for the trip. Applejack had a similar idea, although it wasn't really clear whether or not she was actually asleep; the rim of her down-turned Stetson covering most of her face. Pinkie pie was rummaging about in her own pink luggage case, and from the sound of it, she was already busy devouring whatever snacks she had packed for the trip. Rarity sat absentmindedly reading a magazine, whilst running a small file over her perfect white hooves. Fluttershy was busy entertaining herself by playing with, and occasionally talking to, a small ladybug, which crawled around on one of her butter yellow hooves. The sun had yet to actually breach the horizon, but it was still bright enough from its reflected light to see clearly. As if on cue, the sun peeked above the horizon and issued the first rays of true sunlight upon the trees.

*Any moment now.* Twilight thought, eyes glued to the skies in the direction of Canterlot. After a few more minutes, six black dots could be seen headed from the direction of the capital city and headed for Ponyville. Twilight waited a moment to identify the objects as six golden chariots, each pulled by four stallions in resplendent golden armor. Twilight alerted her friends, earning a whiny moan from Rainbow Dash about "five more minutes" before the unicorn levitated the pegasus to her feet. The six mares readied themselves. A few moments later, the chariots landed in the street in front of the library. They aligned themselves in a long row in an impressive (but as Twilight felt slightly unnecessary) show of force. Luckily most ponies weren't up this early, so the display went relatively unnoticed by the town. The stallions located in the front right of each chariot formation detached themselves from their group and approached the girls. One stepped forward and bowed slightly to the group.

"Ms. Sparkle?" He asked in a gruff voice.

"Yes?" She replied.

"My name is Lieutenant Silver. I am under orders to escort you and



the other Elements of Harmony to Canterlot. Do you require time to prepare yourselves or are you ready to depart?" Twilight looked back at her friends who all gave their nod of approval.

"We're ready." She said with a sense of finality.

"Excellent." The Lieutenant motioned with a hoof and the other guards began to load the girls' luggage on to every other chariot. Twilight watched for a while, slightly confused by the unnecessarily large number of chariots the princess had sent.

"Excuse me sir?" Twilight asked the unicorn timidly. The lieutenant ceased directing his guards to look at her.

"Yes ma'am, Is there anything you need?"

"Oh, no, I was just wondering...why the princess went through all this," She gestured toward the convoy of chariots and war horses. "...all just to pick us up for a ride to Canterlot." The stallion seemed to grow wary at the question, as if something about it had frightened him.

"I'm afraid that information is slightly above my pay grade ma'am. This pick up was orchestrated by Princess Celestia herself." Twilight was expecting a bit more of an answer than that.

"But *why*? What's going on that has the Princess in such a twist?" The tall pony seemed to relent a bit, his demeanor becoming even more uncomfortable.

"If I knew the answer to that, I'm sure I wouldn't be allowed to tell you. The palace has been a bit *hectic* lately. I haven't seen her majesty this unsettled in a *very* long time. Whatever she's up to, she's playing it VERY close to the chest." This did nothing to alleviate Twilight's fears. She occupied herself by chewing on the end of a lock of her purple mane.

"I'm tellin' ya ah can get it mahself!" Applejack said from over by her luggage case, where she was giving two guards quite a rough time.

"Please just let us do our jobs Ms. Applejack." One tried to reason.

“Ahm perfectly capable of pickin’ up mah own things, Thank you very much.” Rarity stepped forward and placed a hoof on Applejack’s shoulder.

“Darling, they’re just trying to help. We all know you’re more than able to handle yourself, but these ponies have a job to do. Just let them take the suitcase dear.” Applejack didn’t respond but she sidestepped and allowed the guards access to her luggage. She looked unhappy with the proceedings but didn’t protest further. Pinkie insisted on grabbing an armful of cookies from her case before surrendering it to the guards. She then insisted they each have one for their “super duper good jobs loading all that super heavy stuff”. The guards each politely refused, but Pinkie was rather...persistent, and before long each of them were nibbling on a white chocolate macadamia nut cookie. Were the circumstances any different, the scene would have been quite humorous.

As soon as the last of the girls’ belongings were loaded the Lieutenant ordered the soldier ponies back to their places pulling the chariots. He directed Twilight and Rainbow Dash to the chariot second in line and they entered and seated themselves. Applejack and Fluttershy were directed to the fourth, Pinkie Pie and Rarity to the sixth. Twilight was, once again, confused by the odd behavior of the guards.

“Umm...Lieutenant?” She called from her spot in the chariot. And he trotted over to her.

“Yes Ms. Sparkle?”

“I’m sorry to keep pestering you, but why exactly are half of these chariots empty? I mean the one up front could easily hold all six of us. Why not just send us all in that one?”

“In the event of an ambush the lead vehicle is always the first to be attacked, and have you ever heard the expression ‘don’t put all your eggs in one basket?’” She had gone a bit pale, but nodded, wondering if the situation was really that bad. The guard pony seemed to pick up on some of Twilight’s emotions. “I wouldn’t worry about it Ms. Twilight, there hasn’t been any sign of direct aggression toward the crown in over 600 years. I’m sure the

princess is merely being overly protective of her most prized student and her friends.” He finished with what must have been an attempt at a reassuring smile. It didn’t help much. He took his place on the lead team, and motioned for them to take off. The first chariot left empty, followed shortly by the second, and so on. Soon the entire convoy had put long since left Ponyville behind. The trip from Canterlot to Ponyville usually only took about 15 to 20 minutes. The capital city was even visible from Ponyville, from its location on the side of a mountain. It was truly a sight to behold; a magnificent feat of structural design, most likely just as much a result of unicorn magic as the architects that constructed it. With their destination rapidly approaching, Twilight felt her gut twist in anticipation. Rainbow Dash, on the other hand appeared all too eager to get to the city.

“I could have flown there twice by now.” She said as she impatiently tapped a hoof. Twilight wished she could have shared in Rainbow’s confidence, but there was a lead weight in her stomach that gave her a rotten feeling about this whole situation.

They landed in a large courtyard directly behind the palace of the royal sisters. Rarity stepped down from the golden chariot, and drank in the view of the castle. It was a marvelous sight; it shined like a diamond, in the sun’s morning rays. Now *this* was the kind of place a lady truly belonged. She moved to join the others, walking as gracefully and dignified as possible. The girls were then escorted inside the castle and led to a spacious lounge where they were told to wait. They sat for about 15 minutes before Celestia finally walked in, with Luna in tow. The girls all scrambled to bow before the monarchs, and Celestia motioned for them to rise. She looked tired. Her normally flowing flawless mane was a bit less shiny, and not nearly as wavy. As if the invisible breeze that seemed to constantly follow her had died to a whisper. Still she managed to smile brightly and she went to nuzzle Twilight, which Twilight returned with enthusiasm.

“Hello my faithful student.”

“Hello Princess.” She spoke with poorly suppressed relief. Now that Celestia was here, she felt the tightness in her gut loosen. The presence of the sun goddess seemed to assuage the dread that had

been accumulating in her heart. Luna then interjected.

"I hate to break this up, Tia, but I'm sure they are all quite curious as to why we have plucked them from their homes and brought them here."

"Of course, my apologies," She took a moment to compose herself. "...Girls, what I am about to tell you is currently the most closely guarded secret in the Equestrian government. Barely a handful of ponies outside my sister and I have been briefed on it, and even fewer have been given a full report. It was against my wishes to do this, and it breaks my heart to ask it of you, but before we can proceed any further," She let out a deep sigh, clearly uncomfortable with the track the conversation was on. "...I'm afraid I must ask you all to submit yourselves to a spell which would render you incapable of repeating any of this information, whether by accident or by force, to any who may misuse it." The girls were slightly taken aback. What the princesses were asking for was in no way, a small favor. Rarity spoke,

"Is that *really* necessary your majesty? Do you not trust us?" Celestia's face seemed to drain itself of happiness. Her head lowered slightly. This was exactly what she had hoped to avoid implying.

"It's not a matter of trust girls. It's a matter of safety. I trust you all with my very life, but this is far more delicate a matter than you can imagine. This revelation could very well upset the entire balance of our nation." A sliver of steel entered her voice. "I'm sorry girls, I truly am, but this is how it has to be. If you elect against the spell, I would not blame you for even a moment, I understand it is a lot to ask of you, but should you decide against it, I will thank you for your time and you may simply return to the courtyard and the guards will take you anywhere you would like to go."

The girls remained silent for a moment, each grappling with the implications of situation. They were at a crossroads. The decision they made now would forever change their lives, and it was not to be taken lightly.

Twilight stood up to her full height and approached the Princesses. Her face bore hard determination. "I'll do it; I trust you, your

majesties. I understand you would not ask this unless it was absolutely necessary.”

“I’ll do it too.” came a diminutive voice from the back of the group. The group was collectively surprised to see that it came from Fluttershy, who of all of them seemed to be the most terrified of this ordeal. Although the more they thought about it, the more sense it made. Fluttershy was naturally inclined to help anypony in need, and the Princesses obviously needed her help. With that, each of the other girls quickly followed suit, giving their nods of approval to the goddesses. Celestia’s horn glowed white hot, and so did each of the six mares. A strange tingling sensation enveloped their throats. The sensation reverberated through their vocal chords and worked its way up to their tongues. When the spell was finished, each of the girls sat somewhat dazed, working the strange feeling out of their jaws.

“Excellent,” Celestia said with an obvious air of relief. “Now, Luna if you would so kindly...” The dark blue alicorn nodded and her horn glowed softly as the doors and windows all shimmered in a protective sound proofing spell.

“Now, if you girls would like to make yourselves comfortable this may take a while to explain.” Princess Luna suggested, and the mares all did as instructed, finding either cushions or armchairs to rest on. They formed a semi circle around the two princesses and waited for Luna to continue, which she did. “Six days ago, at approximately two o’clock in the morning, I spotted an unidentified object descending through the upper atmosphere at an alarming rate. My first reaction was that it was merely a larger meteorite or some other space debris, but upon closer inspection it became evident that this was not the case.” Luna’s horn lit up and an image projected itself in the center of the circle: A large bright ball falling through the night sky, surrounded by a cone of fire. “As it came closer, it became clear that the object was a mechanical body. And it was NOT one of ours.” The girls were captivated and amazed, minds already boggled at the implications. “The craft was apparently somehow damaged and could no longer maintain altitude. It crashed roughly sixty-five miles south of Manehattan.” Luna then projected a picture of the crash site, flaming piles of

wreckage scattered around a smoking crater. “I was one of the first to arrive on the scene. We were able to shield it from the eyes of the general public. The craft was irreparably damaged. There were no survivors. The entire crew of the vessel, maybe a dozen or so, were dead on arrival.”

“That’s terrible.” Fluttershy squeaked, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. Even Rarity had a hoof placed over her mouth in shock.

“Yes...” Luna continued “But I am afraid that is not where the story ends. The bodies and wreckage were moved here to Canterlot and placed in a secure facility. Some of our top scientists and mechanics examined the wreckage. The vessel was obviously no longer functional, but they were able to glean a few of its secrets. We still aren’t clear to its exact purpose, but we do know that it is a *highly* advanced piece of machinery, most likely designed for voyages into deep space. It was powered by engines more advanced than any we have ever been able to produce, and capable of generating staggering amounts of power. It commonly utilizes technologies that are still in the theoretic phase of our most advanced science teams. Our best medical professionals and healers studied the bodies, which were most likely the most important facet of this whole catastrophe.”

“Ah don’t mean ta sound insensitive,” Applejack spoke up. “...but why exactly are the bodies of dead ponies so important, when ya have some sorta super advanced flyin’ machine ta worry about? Ah mean, shouldn’t ya be focusin’ on which country this thing came from, and maybe askin’ them about it rather than bein’ all secretive and sneaky?” The princesses exchanged an uneasy look. Celestia finally answered her.

“Because Applejack...they...*weren’t* ponies.” Applejack’s mouth worked for a moment as if trying to form words, but she instead settled on a very confused look, and kept her mouth shut.

“As my sister said, these creatures are *not* equine in nature. Nor are they any other species we have a classification for.” Luna stopped to take a deep breath. “At this time it is believed that these beings are extra terrestrial lifeforms.”

“Wait wait wait wait wait...Let me get this straight.” Rainbow Dash stood up and interrupted. “Are you trying to tell me, that *aliens* crashed here in Equestria?” She finished with a sarcastic laugh.

“...Yes.”

Dash’s face lost all traces of humor and she plopped back down on her haunches, a bit paler than before.

“....oh.”

“Excuse me, your majesty?” Twilight spoke up. “This is all very fascinating and terrifying, but I still don’t understand why you need us here.”

“Well...” Luna replied. “...do you remember when I told you there were no survivors?”

“...yes.” Twilight’s eyes narrowed in slight confusion.

“That’s...not...entirely true.”

~~~~~

The girls all sat in a semi circle around the Goddesses of the sun and the moon, jaws agape. Rarity was the first to regain her composure.

“So you actually...have one of them, alive?!”

“Long story short, yes.” Celestia answered. Dash shook herself free of the shocked daze she was in.

“Really?! That...is so...AWESOME!!! Can we see it!? Please!?!?”

“That was actually our next stop. If you girls are ready we can go now.” The girls all scrambled to their feet, eager to get a look at the creature.

They followed the Princesses deep into the castle. They walked for almost 20 minutes following corridor after corridor. They finally reached a set of double doors guarded by 6 soldier ponies all in full

armor. The guards allowed them to pass only after Celestia had given them specific orders to allow the girls through as well. Soon, they came to the castle's medical wing. The door bore a menacing looking "QUARANTINE" sign, along with "DO NOT ENTER" and several other scary warning labels. Another group of guards stood at this door allowing no pony, that wasn't allowed, to pass. The doors opened only for Celestia, Luna, and a few other chosen individuals. Once beyond the portal, Twilight noticed a distinct lack of ponies. It seemed the princess had commandeered the entire medical wing for this. A handful of ponies darted here or there scurrying about with charts, x-rays, and alike. The princess led the girls to a large steel door. She stopped before entering and turned to face the girls.

"Now, it isn't exactly a pretty sight. It was injured very badly in the crash, so I will urge any pony with a weak stomach to remain here." When none of the girls spoke up Celestia opened the door. It led to a room, completely empty, but with a large window in the far wall. The window showed a hospital bed. On the bed lay a mass of wires and tubes so thick it was difficult to decipher the figure that lay beneath them. It was somewhat similar anatomically to a pony. It had four legs, the two closest to its head were considerably smaller, but still appeared well muscled and more importantly ended with hands similar to a dragon's, rather than hooves.

Its head was shaped rather unusually. It had no snout to speak of, other than a slight protrusion below its eyes with two small holes, which were currently plugged with clear tubing. Twilight assumed that was the creature's nose. It had a mouth which was occupied by a larger plastic tube, which was pumping some form of gas into the creature's chest which rose and fell rhythmically. Its mane was cropped to a very short buzz and ended somewhere at the base of its neck.

The alien was not exactly hairless. The creature had hair only on its head. It had some light fur on its chest and arms but other than that, it was mostly skin. Celestia however was right. The alien was covered in burns and bruises. Most of its chest was covered in gauze which Twilight assumed covered more severe burns. Its face had been cut and bruised. The left arm was covered in bandages from



shoulder to finger. Its lower half was covered in a white sheet. Any skin that wasn't severely injured was connected to some wire or monitor, keeping track of its vital signs. Celestia began to speak.

"It is actually quite fascinating. He has essentially the same vital organs as any pony; heart, lungs, stomach, liver. If it were any different I'm sure we wouldn't have been able to keep him alive this long."

"...Him?" Twilight asked.

"Oh my yes. It's a male. It seems our anatomy was quite similar indeed." Twilight blushed slightly. "We aren't quite certain of his age. We *think* he is still fairly young. He is fully matured but we can't be certain how old they live to be exactly. Based solely on his cell growth, we estimated him to be anywhere from twenty to forty. Of course without knowing how old they can get, this is all just speculation and guess. For all we really know, in his own species eyes, he may still be a newborn, ." They stood and gawked for another few minutes. "Would you like to get a closer look?" Celestia actually sounded a bit excited, as if she were happy to finally have somepony to share the discovery with. The mares nodded enthusiastically and Luna directed them to a door in the side of the room which had gone previously unnoticed. The door led to another empty room. It was stark white and covered in strange nozzles. The door sealed behind the group and a white disinfectant gas began pouring out of the nozzles. Once the ponies were all effectively sterile, a light on the ceiling flickered green and a second door opened, leading to the room which housed the alien. The girls all warily trotted over to get a better look, while Celestia and Luna busied themselves with the machines that were keeping it alive. Luna eventually trotted over to the group of mares ogling the alien. She then smiled and said,

"Look at this." She placed a hoof on the creatures face and pulled back on its upper lip, revealing a set of white teeth. "Notice anything?" She said, and Applejack spoke,

"Its teeth are...sharp. 'Specialy them four." She indicated the four canine teeth jutting from its gums. "That means it's a carnivore don't it? It eats meat." Luna smiled,

“Very good, that’s what we assumed at first too, but look.” She pulled back further revealing the teeth in the back of its mouth. They were much more flat, designed to chew both plants and animals. “Omnivore!” She said, a little too excitedly.

“What’s wrong with it? Why won’t it wake up?” Fluttershy spoke at a barely audible level. Celestia answered.

“Well, by all means he should be long dead, and if anyone other than Luna or I had arrived when we did, he likely would have been. He was trying his hardest to cling to life but he had sustained injuries that no living thing should have been able to survive.” Then as if to emphasize Celestia’s point Luna began reading from a chart.

“Skull fractures, severe concussions, left foreleg shattered. Six broken ribs, left lung punctured, spinal fracture, right hip broken, several organs bleeding internally, right rear leg broken in two places, and burns covering almost 20% of his body. He’s had a bad week.” She said with a bit of black humor.

“So why can’t you just, you know, heal him with magic?” Dash asked.

“We tried,” Celestia answered. “We received...mixed results. We were able to reset most of his bones, and stop the internal bleeding, but it’s strange. He seems...resistant to magic. When we try to heal a cut, sometimes it works, other times his own cells turn on the magically healed area, they seem to reject the healed tissue and it kills off its own cells. He seems to mostly reject minor healing spells. We have been slightly more successful with the more complex spells, but we, more than once, have inadvertently almost killed him. You must understand that no creature should have survived such wounds, magic or no. We debated for a long time simply allowing the poor thing to die, but we decided there was a chance we could save it and possibly learn more about it. That’s, also where you girls come in.” The mares all stopped and gave her their full attention. “We have exhausted every avenue we could, yet he still hasn’t shown any sign of waking out of this comatose state. It seems that the joint power of both Luna and I just isn’t enough. The combined elements of harmony are one of the most powerful and ancient magics in existence. Luna and I were hoping to tap that

power and combine it with our own. Then perhaps we'll have a shot at saving him."

"When exactly are you planning on trying this?" Twilight asked, eager to get started.

"Tomorrow," Luna answered. "You girls are surely quite tired from today's excitement, and the spell is by no means an easy one. We want you all to be well rested before we attempt it."

Satisfied with finally having a solid plan, the girls returned to inspecting the alien.

"Do ya think we oughta try and learn a bit more about it before we go wakin' it up?" AJ asked. "Ah mean, how do we know he's gonna be friendly?"

"We don't really," Celestia answered. "but we have actually learned a surprising amount about it. It's a carbon based bipedal, highly dexterous creature. It breathes oxygen; it's comprised mostly of water, all very similar to a pony. The only real difference is its shape."

"What's all this?" Pinkie said, her lower half sticking out the top of a large metal crate.

"That's everything the alien had in its possession, when we first brought it here." Pinkie began digging through the box. She picked out a large pair of tan boots, and some rather strange looking clothes. The other girls soon joined her in examining the creature's strange possessions. A pair of pants, with matching blouse that would have made Rarity gag. They were both made of a durable material, on which was printed several thousand tiny squares, each a slightly different color of tan or brown, in a strange, seemingly erratic, grouping patterns. The effect gave a camouflaged look. Two gold leaves were pinned onto the collar of the garment. The pants had several pockets both in the front, back, and down the legs. The blouse had two pockets on the breast of the garment. Dash slipped her forelegs in the arm holes and stood on her hind legs. She admired herself in the alien clothing.

"I kinda like it." She announced. "It's very intimidating." She chuckled and Twilight noticed some text sewn on top of either pocket. She questioned Celestia about it.

"We think that's his name, maybe the name of his family or clan. We can't really be sure."

Twilight read the letters. "DORAN" was stitched above the right pocket. "U.S. MARINES" was stitched above the other. She found more clothes, a green shirt, a pair of shorts, even socks. She placed his clothes aside and continued digging. Something shiny caught her eye. She pulled out a long silver chain on which were two metal tags. Both engraved with the same message.

**DORAN**

**SHANE, T. O-NEG**

**540 33 6010**

**USMC MED**

**NO PREFERENCE**

"What about these?" Twilight asked holding them up.

"Again, we can't say for sure but we think it's a form of identification tag."

Twilight then came upon a rather heavy piece of metal. L shaped, with a molded handle, which would have fit his hand perfectly. The long end of the L ended with a steel tube which ran the length of the piece. A small lever protected by a band of steel which joined at either arm of the L. Twilight held it up to Celestia.

"Any idea what this is?"

"We assumed it to be some type of weapon." She said, "I'd be careful with it if I were you. We studied it a bit and it seems that it harnesses a combustible powder, to send metal slugs out of that barrel at incredible speeds. Its either a weapon or it fulfills some other use we couldn't think of." Another item caught Twilight's eye.

A mess of buckles and straps all connected to a sort of rectangular tube, made of a very tough canvas material. Twilight slid the metal device into the tube experimentally and it fit perfectly. Another strap wrapped around the base of the L and snapped onto the other side of the tube, securing it in place. Twilight gently set the device back down in its box. Most of the girls had gone back to staring at the sleeping alien. Pinkie scrutinized it with one bright blue eye.

“You say it’s a he huh?” She examined his face. It certainly looked masculine. He had a strong jaw, heavily muscled, but it was tough to tell with a creature she had never encountered before. Pinkie began to lift the sheet of its waist before her hoof was slapped away by Rarity who was giving her a clearly disapproving look. The girls all chuckled.

“Alright, have you girls seen enough?” Luna asked. As curious as they were they couldn’t help but realize how tired and hungry they were. They all nodded an affirmative, and the group left the creature to sleep in peace.

The Princesses treated the girls to a royal dinner before they were shown their rooms. Celestia announced they would have free reign of the castle but they were urged to get some rest. Tomorrow was going to be a busy day. Most of the girls went to explore the castle. Twilight, however went to explore the library. She sat herself in front of a stack of medical tomes, healing spells, and anatomy. She strived to learn as much as she could about tomorrow’s procedure before she attempted it. Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash went back to the medical wing to get another look at the alien, maybe something had changed. They entered the facility and passed the quarantine doors. They stepped through the sanitizing spray and once again were back in the hospital room. Pinkie Pie took full advantage of their lack of supervision and climbed right up onto the bed with the alien. Legs on either side of it, she scrutinized it up close, face to face. She lifted and eyelid with her hoof. The pupil contracted inside a blue/green iris, but otherwise he remained staring off into space.

“Hellllooooooooo? Wake up Mr. sleepy bones!” She gently tapped him on the forehead. “Anypony home?” She waited a moment for a response but the only answer she received was the mechanical whir

of the breathing machines. She hopped down and placed a cupcake on the bedside table.

“What’s that for?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“Duh, silly. He’s been asleep for almost a week. He’s gonna be hungry!”

“How do you even know it likes cupcakes? For all we know it’s going to try and eat one of us.” Dash seemed to realize what she had just said. She and Pinkie Pie shared a nervous look, both realizing that *actually* was a very likely possibility. Suddenly neither of them harbored any desire to be alone in the room with a potentially pony eating alien, and they began a, not so casual, sprint for the exit. They practically ran back through the castle. They met up with Rarity and Applejack who were exploring the mysteries of the castle grounds. After the girls had their fill of shenanigans, they retired to their respective rooms. Twilight remained nose deep in her books until she realized how late it was getting. She reluctantly retired as well.



The girls woke extra early, eager for the day to begin. They were served a large breakfast in the lounge they had first met in. They chatted non-stop about the alien, and whether or not they thought they could successfully wake it. The door creaked open and a few palace servants came to clean up after the girl’s breakfast. The six mare’s mouths were immediately forced shut. That strange tingle once again echoed through their vocal chords, rendering them speechless. The princesses’ spell definitely worked. Although its sudden application startled them a bit, as if to remind them that this was no trivial matter. After the servants left, the mood in the room became a bit more somber. The girls’ thoughts began to drift toward some of the negatives of the situation.

“Ahm still not sure wakin’ this thing up is such a great idea. Ah mean, we got no clue as ta what it’s gonna do once it wakes up.” AJ pointed out.

“...Well...um...we don’t know that he’s necessarily *bad* either. He

may be very friendly, I'm sure he will be thankful for us saving him."

"Maybe..." She feigned a relent, "but how friendly do ya think it'll be when it finds all its friends are dead. No matter how friendly it is, it will still look mighty suspicious ta see almost a dozen of your kind all dead and in Equestrian custody." Fluttershy hid behind her own pink mane. She had to admit it *was* going to be an awkward conversation. Twilight spoke up.

"I think all we can do is try our best and hope that he is a reasonable being." She spoke with assurance but deep down she felt just as wary as the others. Ironically Fluttershy seemed to be the most confident about the creature. It seemed to be her nature to do all she could to help nurse animals back to health, and this was simply a...big, alien, animal.

"Don't worry AJ, Let's say he does turn out to be some sorta pony-eating monster. He won't be able to do anything with BOTH the princesses there. I'm telling ya, we got nothing to worry about." Dash said, hovering around the ceiling of the lounge.

"I'm quite certain Rainbow is right." Rarity spoke up. "But I simply can not help but agree with Applejack to a degree. I mean, let's say you are right Fluttershy and he turns out to be the most friendly gentlecolt one can imagine, but what do you think would happen if more of them show up here looking for their missing, and find them dead in an Equestrian facility....I doubt they would stop to ask our side of the story before they begin exacting their revenge." This line of reasoning seemed to hit the group rather hard. None of them really anticipated the possibility of more of these things showing up. The more they thought about it, the more nervous they got about the fast approaching procedure. As if on cue, Luna walked through the door followed closely by Celestia, who was looking much more like herself today. It seemed she had finally gotten a good night's sleep. She spoke to the group in a rather chipper voice.

"Are you ready?" Her smile betrayed her obvious excitement. Luckily it seemed to be rather contagious. Now that the two goddesses were here, it felt as though nothing could ever go wrong. The girls all nodded enthusiastically and the group began the trek

to the medical wing. The trip felt like it took ages. Each step carried weight. Every hoof fall brought them closer to the room where all their questions would be answered. They eventually reached the door that lead to the observation room, but before entering, Celestia turned to the group.

“This is it girls, last chance. If any of you want out, I suggest you get out now.”

“What? You expect us to quit now?! HA! As if. Let’s do this!” Dash said doing a little flip in the air.

“We’re staying. We’re in it till the end, princess.” said Twilight with steel in her voice. The princess nodded and moved through the door. The rest followed her though and into the sanitizing chamber. The stark white room once again filled with the sterilizing smoke, and as soon as the girls no longer harbored any risk of infection, the light flicked green and the second door unsealed and inched open. The princesses positioned themselves on either side of the bed. The girls took places in a semi circle ending with the two goddesses.

“Take a few deep breaths girls.” Celestia said as she closed her eyes. Her brow lowered in deep concentration. The princesses’ horns glowed, softly at first, but it quickly became brighter. Soon it reached a point where the girls could barely see. The bright aura of magic was blinding. The air seemed to grow hot and thick. Everything seemed to vibrate with energy. A thick copper taste covered their tongues. An arc of wild electricity joined itself between the sun and moon goddesses.

The lights in the room flickered and dimmed. Erratic flashes of lightning sprung to and from the princesses. Occasionally a bolt would arc away and dissipate against the walls, or floor. Soon one string of fire linked itself from Celestia to Twilight, it then spread from Twilight to Rarity. The bolt followed the circuit joining each of the girls consecutively, until it reached back to Luna. It didn’t hurt, as one would assume being struck by an arc of electricity would, but it made her insides flash from hot to cold, her heart beat furiously. She could feel the spell probing her entire being, searching for magical energies to absorb. She felt the spell tap in to her magic, but it also went deeper, commandeering some of the



very depths of her soul.

Twilight couldn't hear any more. Only an ear splitting ringing could be distinguished from the show of light and fire. Twilight managed to look up to Celestia, her eyes were wide, they glowed white hot, and sweat beaded her forehead. Her jaw was clenched and she was under obvious strain. She shifted her gaze to Luna, who seemed to be under similar tension. Her own eyes did not glow white, but rather deep blue, almost black. Twilight looked to her friends who were also squinting and dealing with similar afflictions, with the exception of Pinkie Pie who wore a pair of sunglasses and a wide, excited smile.

The bolt shot forward from each pony, and struck the alien in the chest. A violent spray of sparks and electricity shot in all directions. The machines all monitoring the creature went berserk. The heart monitor sounded alarms as his heart rate skyrocketed to almost 300 beats per minute. His blood pressure increased to a dangerous level, and his entire body began to seize. His muscles clenched and his entire mass spasmed violently. His face however gave no indication of even being aware of this. He still appeared fast asleep. He glistened as sweat poured through his skin. His temperature had reached 101 degrees, and was continuing to inch higher.

Sparks flew off the respirators as they stuttered to keep up with the oxygen his body was consuming. The entire creature began to glow. Soon you could no longer see it from under the cocoon of magic that wrapped around it. The noise was reaching an unbearable level. Twilight's ears pressed down as hard as possible, attempting to block it, but she soon realized the noise was coming from inside her head. The cocoon grew brighter until nothing else could be seen. The magic that enveloped the creature shattered with a thunderous crack and shot a wave of energy in all directions.

The girls were thrown against the walls. The room grew dim until it turned pitch black. Red light barely filled the room as emergency running board lights lit the floor. The girls staggered to their feet. Even Princess Celestia was knocked back on her haunches. Luna lowered her wings, which she had raised to protect herself. She hurried over to Rarity and Pinkie Pie who were in a tangled mess in the corner. The overhead lights slowly flickered into existence.

Celestia helped Twilight to her hooves, before addressing the group.

“Everypony all right?” They groggily sounded off their affirmations. Dash sat on her rump, head held between her hooves.

“*Barely.*” She complained.

“I’m sorry girls.” Celestia said in a voice laced with regret. “I didn’t know the reaction would be so...unstable.” Her head lowered. “I should have done more research, but I cut corners and you girls paid the price for it. I’m sorry.” Luna trotted over to her and lifted Celestia’s head with a nuzzle.

“You did the best you could sister. You know we could have never predicted this. Nothing like this has ever been attempted before, *especially* with something from another planet.” Celestia raised her head, and gave Luna a small smile, which quickly disappeared.

“Thank you, but it doesn’t change the fact that this was still my fault. There were too many variables with this spell. I shouldn’t have attempted it. And now any hope of solving this mystery died with him.” She gestured back to the alien. The girls forgot about it in the explosion. The wires that connected it to the machines had been severed. The clear tube that normally was busy pushing air into its lungs was gone. Following the tube from the machine, Applejack held up the other end which looked as if it had been, melted off. The alien itself lay there, as if nothing had ever happened. The cuts and bruises that had covered it had all healed, along with the burns. But it showed no signs of life. It remained perfectly still. If anypony got a quick glance they may have assumed it was sleeping. Pinkie Pie trotted up to the bed and rested her head on its sternum. She sat there for a moment.

“He’s not dead.” She said matter of factly.

“What?!” Celestia and Luna said in perfect unison. They both dashed over and pressed an ear to its chest. They could hear the distinct, *Thump Thump, Thump Thump*, of a beating heart. Suddenly it drew in a long breath, which caused all of them to take a step back. It began to take steady deep breaths.

“Dear me, ...It is alive.” Luna said in a clearly shocked voice. She then let out an amazed laugh. “It’s alive! It worked!!!” Celestia didn’t celebrate, however. She actually looked a bit concerned. She raised a hoof to his head and lifted an eyelid. The pupil contracted, but remained staring off into space. Celestia’s horn lit up again. A beam of green light encased the creature scanning it, inside and out.

“I don’t understand,” She said “biologically it’s perfectly healthy... but why hasn’t it woken up?” She then telekinetically picked a machine off the floor and flicked a switch experimentally. The tiny screen flickered to life. Satisfied with the device she grabbed two wires that protruded from the back and attached them to its temples. The machine began to display an erratic looking string of green.

“What is that, exactly, Princess?” Rarity inquired.

“This,” Celestia answered. “...is a machine that allows me to see somepony’s brainwaves.”

“What’s it sayin’ about his?” AJ piped up from across the room. Celestia turned the machine so that they all could see. She pointed with a hoof to the screen

“These, are his brain waves. More specifically Delta Waves, 2.11 Hz of them.”

“Umm...one more time, in Equestrian this time maybe?” Dash said slightly aggravated. Luna spoke up.

“It means he is still *very much* asleep.” She shifted her speech to her sister. “Maybe we underestimated the extent of brain damage. He has sustained injuries that no amount of magic should have been able to fix. There is no precedent to draw from here. I think we threw out the rule book a long time ago with this one, Tia.” Celestia had to admit the truth in her sister’s words.

“So what happens now?” Dash asked from her hovering spot overtop of the alien.

“I... don’t know.” Celestia answered. “I suppose we’ll just have to

wait for a change. It's out of my hooves now. He's on his own."

The group left the room, defeated. Celestia stopped at the nurse's station and alerted them of the failed spell. They were told to keep an extra sharp watch on the creature and immediately inform her of any change, no matter how minor. The princesses led them back to the study. They weren't able to stay long as they each had royal duties to attend to. They told the mares they were welcome to stay as long as they liked, but if they chose to return home, a chariot would be available to escort them tomorrow morning. Twilight announced she would stay as long as the princess had need of her, the others heartily agreed.

Now that they had no real task they wandered for a bit. Not really sure what to do with themselves. Rarity immediately seized the opportunity to acquaint herself with the nobility of the capital city. She spent about 2 hours in her room preparing herself before stepping out in a glimmering blue formal dress. Fluttershy went to relish in the royal gardens, Rainbow Dash went to go stretch her wings, and Applejack went to find some way to contact her family, to alert them of her extended stay. Pinkie Pie was already gone. She had disappeared, seemingly into thin air. Twilight, not surprisingly, made her way to the library. She didn't really have a specific target, so she grabbed a few books on medicine and anatomy, and made her way back to the medical wing. She set up shop in the observation room and began taking notes. She documented everything from the creature itself, to the care that the princesses had administered so far. She entered the room with an anatomy book. Her horn glowed as she attempted to duplicate the scanning spell she had seen Celestia use earlier. She was met with limited success. The message was fuzzy but she could identify the alien's presence. She fine tuned her spell a bit and the connection became much clearer. She scanned for any lingering injuries. None presented themselves. The creature was as healthy as it had ever been, maybe more so.

*So why won't you wake up?*

Twilight had a new idea. She probed the alien's mind with her magic. Searching for any signs of cognizance, she scoured the depths of its consciousness, but found no indication that it was

aware of its surroundings. The recesses of his alien mind were chaotic. She felt the overwhelming presence of memories, most of which were completely incomprehensible to her. She likened the experience to being in an abandoned library, where all the books were bound shut. His mind was full of memories and thoughts. He clearly possessed unquestionable intelligence, not that it was in question.

Twilight retreated back into herself to make careful notes of her findings. She wrote down everything she discovered about the creature. The alien had a few scars that were fully healed, implying they had been received well before the crash. It also gave her an idea of how their society functioned. They seemed to be far too advanced to still compete for mates, but she didn't rule that out entirely. They were obviously not a magic using species. It would explain why the wounds were not healed immediately, but rather healed over time. It also may have explained their far superior technology.

*Invention is born of necessity.* Twilight mused to herself. *Perhaps if we didn't have magic we too would have been forced to adapt much more quickly.*

She trotted over to the box which housed his belongings. She pulled out his metal tags. She copied their information down in her notes. She looked at the alien. She looked back at the tags, and re read them. "Doran, Shane T." A thought crept into her head. She approached the creature. She placed her mouth close to its ear.

"Shane?"

A small beep rang from a machine behind her. It startled her slightly. But excited she smiled and tried again a little louder. "Shane?" The brainwave monitor beeped, and the green line jumped slightly. It was a small spike, but it excited her like a foal on their birthday. She almost shouted now. "Shane! Can you hear me?" The line jumped again. He was responsive! "Wake up Shane!" The line made a barely visible spike. "Wake up Shane T. Doran!" She looked desperately at the screen. It didn't even move this time. Her heart sank, She was losing him. "NO! Don't go back to sleep! WAKE UP! ...SHANE!" She shouted at the comatose alien, slightly

irritated at its fading cooperation. The line continued the pattern she now recognized as Delta waves. "Shane?" Nothing happened. "Hellooooo!" Still nothing. She went sat back down at her temporary desk, highly disappointed, but she didn't let it mar the fact that for one brief moment he responded to an outside stimuli. She avidly recorded the event, making a note of telling the princess the very next chance she got. Hours passed as Twilight took notes diligently, occasionally stopping to go check a heart rate or blood pressure. Once or twice she even got to see a female pony with a red cross for a cutie mark change out its IV. Each time the pony gave her a happy smile, but never exchanged more than a few pleasantries.

The sound of a few hoof beats roused Twilight out of her book, a textbook on modern medical practices. She turned around to see AJ and Rainbow Dash enter the room.

"Anythin' yet there Twi?"

"Not really, A few blips on the monitors but other than that...not a thing."

"C'mon sugarcube. We're gonna get ourselves some dinner and hit the hay." Twilight stood and stretched her legs. She followed them out, but first took one last look through the observation window. She sighed and followed her friends. While they were walking Dash hovered circles around them. She began to speak,

"Ya know. I've been thinkin'... What if this guy never wakes up?" Neither AJ or Twilight had an answer. "I think we ought to start selling tickets to get your picture taken with it." The girls all shared a laugh, happy for the levity Dash brought to the group.

"I mean...what else are we gonna do, besides sit on our hooves and grow old waiting for this thing to finish napping?" Dash *did* bring up a good point. They didn't really have a game plan anymore. Twilight wasn't comfortable with just "playing it by ear". Still, they didn't have much of a choice in the matter. Resigned to wait, Twilight returned with her friends. None of the girls really noticed how much the day had taken out of them. They all yawned their way through dinner, and fell asleep almost the second their heads hit the pillow.



The girls were invited to have breakfast with the princesses, an offer which they heartily accepted. They discussed a few trivial matters but were unable to broach the topic which they all so desired. For they were, unfortunately, joined by a few members of the court. Twilight recognized a few of them. There was the current commander of the guard, who gave Twilight a wave and a happy smile. There was also numerous diplomats and government officials, most of whom Twilight could not identify. Luna was there as well. She sat next to Celestia doing a very poor job of concealing her boredom with the proceedings. Rarity was all in a fluster. She had not been told that this meal would take place in the presence of some of Canterlot's most notable ponies. She insisted she had a gown that would have been simply *perfect* for the setting, yet she had left it in her room. Despite her fussing she still managed to hit it off with the nobles. She schmoozed like a well oiled machine. When she wasn't busy making a name for herself, she kept busy pestering Applejack and Rainbow Dash about their horrid table manners. Fluttershy was, as usual, hiding behind a lock of her luxurious pink mane. She occasionally poked her head out to nibble at her meal. Pinkie Pie somehow managed to shovel staggering amounts of food into her tiny body. It didn't seem physically possible for all that food to fit inside the petite pink filly, but most ponies had long since learned not to seek logical answers when Pinkie Pie was involved. After the meal had finished, the group broke from the table and did their best to mingle with the princesses' guests. The commander of the guard approached Twilight.

"Hello Miss Sparkle!"

"Hello Commander, It's been too long." She gave the tall pony a friendly hug. She had met the colt numerous times during her tutelage under Celestia. She had grown accustomed to his presence, and he had become slightly fond of her. He had no children of his own, and given his almost constant contact with Celestia, he had watched her grow up. Once or twice Celestia had even left Twilight in his care, during times where her duties forced her away.

"So! What is it that has Celestia in such strange mood lately?"

Twilight panicked a bit. They had yet to think of a cover story in the event somepony started asking questions. "I mean, if she were to confide in anyone, I just as well assume it would be you."

"Oh...um..yes, the princess, well, I ...uh..." She stammered desperately flailing for any excuse that came to mind. But he cut her off.

"...and not to mention, it being important enough to recall her most faithful student AND the other elements of harmony. It doesn't seem like Celestia to go through all this trouble for a mere visit."

"Oh well, you know how the princess can get..." She chuckled nervously. He leaned closer than Twilight felt was necessary, and continued.

"Why, if I didn't know any better, I'd say Celestia was trying to hide something." Beads of sweat began forming on Twilight's forehead, and her fake smile grew to an arguably creepy level. "Perhaps it has something to do with the reports of a strange object crashing outside Manehattan?" He leaned in even closer, noses almost touching. She couldn't escape his piercing gaze. Just then Luna strode past and deadpanned,

"Relax Twilight, he knows everything." And then carried on passed them. Twilight looked back at the commander who was now wearing a huge smile, and barely containing his jollity. The look on Twilight's face was enough to send him over the top and he almost fell over from the strength of his boisterous laughing. Twilight let out her breath, which she realized she had been holding, and brought a hoof up to her chest in a futile attempt to get her heart to stop racing. She barely managed to speak.

"...why?" Her voice colored with indignation and some residual terror. He fought back any additional bursts of merriment and answered her.

"Just testing your mettle kid....Needless to say, you failed. But it's always fun watching you squirm." Twilight stared at him secretly hoping her looks could kill. He reached up a hoof and mussed up her mane. "Aw, don't be mad Sparky it was all in good fun." She



stormed off to rejoin her friends leaving the still chuckling stallion behind. It wasn't the first time he had played a joke of this manner on the filly.

The girls left the gathering to return to the lounge where they spent a great deal of time. If it weren't for the whole "potential extra terrestrial invasion" thing, the trip would have been a lovely getaway for the girls. They didn't always have a chance to be together for such an extended period of time. It always felt right being together. Life often tried to get in the way but they knew in their hearts that nothing would ever separate them.

~~~~~

Several stories below, a nurse pony sat at her station. She was quietly humming to herself, filling out paperwork. Her ordinary duties consisted of assisting the princesses' royal physician, but Celestia herself had assigned her a special job. She and only a handful of others were given custody of some sort of new species. They hadn't been told where the princess had found the poor thing but it was so near death when they brought it in, she feared it wouldn't survive the night. The princesses however had seen fit to lend their direct intervention to keep the creature alive. They were given a rush course in its anatomy, and told to keep it breathing at all costs. And by no stretch of the imagination had the creature made it easy on them. The first few nights it seemed to crash every other hour or so. Its heart would give out or it would have a nasty reaction to some healing spell. Lately however the beast had finally seemed to find some rest, (she didn't really know if a coma counted as rest) but it was still a good thing. It was at least staying alive by itself now...for the most part. The Princesses' had even recruited the elements of harmony for one big shebang of a healing spell, but from she had been told, they had not succeeded in waking the thing from its sleep. Most of the "on call" medical staff elected to return to their usual schedules after learning the animal no longer harbored much chance of waking. She volunteered to stay behind. She was curious to see where this adventure was going to take her...and she had to admit, the increased pay helped a lot.

A sudden sound broke the silence of the near deserted medical wing, a noise she recognized all too clearly. Her lead weight sank

into her stomach.

“Oh no...”

~~~~~

The mare leapt to her hooves and began sprinting for the only room in the medical wing with a patient. The obnoxious beeping noise she ran toward was sounding the alert of a patient going into cardiac arrest. She had to stop a moment to grab the crash cart. The rapid beeps of the alarm died for a moment and she slowed to try and hear it. The beeping had stopped, but the noise that replaced it made her insides go cold. The high pitched tone of a flat-lining heart monitor. All the sudden every alarm in the room started going off. It was like a horrible chorus of death, singing to whoever was unfortunate enough to hear its music. She raced to the door which she barged her way through and stuffed herself in the sanitizing chamber. If she had only stopped a moment she would have noticed a set of terrified blue green eyes watching her through the observation window. She didn't even wait for the sprays to finish but rather she attempted to pry open the second door and force her way inside the room.

She stood for a moment, very confused. She was definitely in the right room. All the life support machines were blaring obnoxiously...but the bed was empty. Her first thought was simply, “...*this is just like the beginning of every horror movie I have ever seen.*” Right then she heard the door close behind her as whatever had been hiding behind pushed it shut. “*Yep, JUST like every horror movie.*” Her vision went black as something collided with the back of her head, and she fell to the ground unconscious.

~~~~~

Twilight decided to check up on their inter-planetary friend one more time before hitting the town with the girls, who were waiting for her in the castle courtyard. She trotted through the hallways and passages that made up the familiar route to the medical wing. She passed the sets of double doors that led to the medical facility itself, and after passing the nurses station, she immediately noticed something was out of place. The friendly nurse who usually sat

there was missing. And even more surprising, some almighty racket seemed to be emanating from the room which housed the alien.

Dread filled Twilight as she cautiously moved toward the room. She barely took a step before she was stopped dead in her tracks. She was frozen in terror. A tall, two legged figure stepped out of the room...very much awake. Time seemed to slow down to emphasize the enormity of the moment. The alien paused as it noticed Twilight shaking in fear. It met her gaze. Its eyes bored into hers with uncertainty, as if deciding whether or not the small purple mare was a threat. Twilight noticed that it had found its clothes, also its weapon which was strapped to its right thigh. It was much taller than it seemed laying in the bed unconscious.

Twilight's head only came up to about its stomach. It was probably 9 hands or so taller than she was. How long they stayed there eyeballing each other Twilight had no idea. But the sound of angry shouts and the thunderous pounding of armored hooves snapped them out of their stare.

Twilight saw the guards round a corner much farther down the hallway. They slowed as they beheld the strange creature, but did not halt their charge. The alien looked back and forth between the guards barreling toward him and Twilight a few times before it lowered itself and took off in a dead sprint, directly at Twilight. Every fiber of her being screamed for her to move, but her terror stricken limbs would not budge, despite the monster that was currently hurdling toward her. It was only about fifteen feet away now, still in full on sprint.

Twilight's hooves finally began to move as she also began to sprint in the opposite direction. The alien followed her. It was fast but not nearly as fast as a full grown pony. A fact that, Twilight hoped, would allow the guards to catch it before *it* caught her. Twilight ran aimlessly for a few horror filled moments, she had put a bit of distance between herself and the alien, but it was still following her. Maybe it thought she would lead it to an exit. She turned a corner and died a little inside. It was wrong. She had run into a dead end. The hallway ended with a large window in the far wall and no side hallways to escape down. She pressed herself firmly against the far wall of the hallway and prayed the guards had

already subdued the beast.

Her prayers stopped when she saw it skid to a halt at the other end of the corridor. She was trapped now. She tried to be brave, but there's something about thinking you're about to die that seems to suck the bravado right out of you. The alien looked at her and then behind at the rapidly approaching shitstorm of guards.

It barreled toward Twilight and made it about halfway down the hallway before the guards turned the corner and pursued. It put on an extra burst of speed. It was right on top of her now. Even worse, he hooked a foreleg under the still petrified Twilight and squeezed her to his chest. His left arm wrapped itself around her ribcage, pinning her own forelegs to her chest. Her rear legs still touched the ground, but barely. Twilight was in too much shock to really register what was going on. But the point became evidently clear when she felt icy metal pressed against her throat. She was a hostage now.

The purple mare had never been this scared in her entire life. An alien being now held what felt to be a surgical scalpel to her throat. The guards stopped in their tracks. A few of the unicorns' horns glowed but from somewhere in the mass of soldier ponies, one said,

"Easy boys, she wants it *alive*." This did not seem to sit well with the alien who hugged Twilight closer and pressed the blade of the scalpel up to the hollow of her neck. Some of the unicorns did however cease the menacing glow of their horns. This Mexican standoff went on for several minutes. Twilight could feel the alien's heart hammering in its chest. She decided to make a last ditch effort to save herself.

"Please..." She squeaked out. Its eyes bore into the back of Twilight's head. "Please don't do this. Celestia please don't." It didn't release her. "Shane?" The alien froze at the mention of the name. "Shane please." He felt a hot tear fall onto his arm. He knew that voice. It was the woman's voice that echoed in his dreams. His eyes darted around rapidly as if searching for anyway out of the situation. The guards all reeled back when it spoke.

"I don't want to hurt anyone." The guards still seemed shocked that

the thing could speak. "But I need to leave, *now*." One of the guards, an older unicorn, stepped forward.

"We can't let you do that. Now just put the filly down, and we can work this out."

"I don't think you understand," He said with a touch of desperate laughter. "I *CAN'T* be here! And the longer I stay, the worse it's going to get!"

"Son you just knocked out a royal staff member, and are threatening the life of the princess' personal protege. You aren't going anywhere." The alien did a double take of the purple pony he held in his arms.

"...ok, admittedly that probably looks pretty bad from your end."

"Just put her down and come with us, your only making things worse for yourself."

"I can't." He said desperately.

"What choice do you have son?" He murmured to himself something Twilight had trouble catching.

"There's always a choice."

They had backed a strange wolf into a corner. It did what it thought it had to, to survive. He back-peddled a few small steps before he bumped into the window. He snuck a quick peek out the glass pane, before he returned his gaze to the guards. . He pressed his head to the back of Twilight's and whispered at a barely audible level.

"I'm really sorry about this."

Suddenly the knife was thrown to the ground and Twilight was unceremoniously launched into the group of guards, like some live pony game of bowling. She screamed as she sailed through the air and collided with the guards, knocking more than a few off their feet. The alien turned and whipped out the metal L from its holster. It pointed it directly at the glass window. Three ear folding cracks echoed through the hallway, along with the sound of splitting glass.

The creature launched itself through the window shattering the glass and disappearing out the portal. It only took a moment for the guards to regain their composure. Once they did the pegasi in the group hurled themselves out the broken window and after the thing.

Twilight was helped to her hooves by some guards whom she assured she was fine. She went to the window and looked down. It turns out it was slightly less than a two story drop. She saw the alien sprinting across the courtyard, trying desperately to make its escape. Four pegasus guards were quickly closing the gap. It had almost run a hundred yards, before one of the pegasi slammed into its back, sending them both rolling in a tangle of limbs.

The pegasus guard had him pinned against the ground, hooves wrapped tightly around its middle. The alien threw an elbow back and it collided with the side of the guard's head, sending his golden helm flying. The pegasus soldiers were a bit closer to the alien's height, but he still had maybe five hands on them. The stunned pegasus rolled off his back, but by then the other guards had landed and threw themselves into the fray. Two grabbed his arms and pinned them to the ground. A third tried to jump on top of him and prevent him from getting up, but as he was in the air, the alien reared his legs and delivered a buck that would have made Applejack proud, launching the guard into a tangled heap of feathers.

The alien wormed his right arm free, and slammed a fist into the cheek of the guard pinning his left arm. The guard staggered back. Now with both his arms free he grabbed the remaining guard by the head and crushed his forehead against the pegasus' face, in a devastating head butt. The guard reeled back holding its face which was leaking blood all over the grass.

The alien scrambled to its feet and continued to run. By this time several more guards were pouring out of the castle to assist after seeing the, none too clandestine engagement. The alien continued to run, rather futilely, but she at least had to admire its resolve. It dashed around a corner and Twilight quickly teleported down to the courtyard. She ran as fast as she could after the guards. She rounded the corner to see the alien running parallel to the base of

the castle wall. Suddenly several dozen unicorn guards appeared, blocking his path. He skidded as he tried to change course away from the wall. He was again obstructed when the pegasus guards landed, cutting off his only route of escape.

He was trapped. His back to the wall, and guards on all sides. Twilight ran up and forced her way past the guards to get a better look. He paced, like a caged dog. He breathed heavily and he was covered in small cuts, which oozed blood down his face, neck and arms. He continued to pace. His weapon in hand. He was outnumbered, he knew it. He would be dead before he got a shot off.

A large flash of light and a pop resolved itself to be Princess Celestia. She stood in the semi circle of guards and stared at the alien, who stopped his pacing to inspect the newest threat. He swiveled his head left and right, examining the painful obviousness of his now hopeless escape. He slowed his breathing. He seemed to compose himself. He merely stood there. His eyes turned skyward. He paused a moment to look at the sun, and admire the beautiful summer day. His gaze came back down. He stared at Celestia a moment, then at Twilight. His gaze went to the horizon, and seemed to focus on some distant point. His eyes closed. He took a deep breathe, and flicked the barrel of the weapon up under his chin,

“NO!” Twilight screamed. Celestia raised a wing and cut off Twilight’s view, while sweeping her into a protective embrace. Her ears folded from the sound of the shot, which echoed of the walls of the palace, followed by the unmistakable sound of a body crumbling to the ground.

# ARTICLE 2 Part II

ARTICLE 2

PART II

By: Muppetz (!Gsih3Wfnlk)

7 DAYS PRIOR

LOCATING...

Err.

WIDENING SCAN

Err.

Location – Cannot Pinpoint -

Running Diagnostic...

WARNING

Life Suppt. Sys. – 46.22% ---Yellow

Primary Sys. Drv. --- UNAVAILABLE

Re-routing Power to core drives.

Run Primary System Analysis

...running

...running

-EX-V38-

CORVETTE CLASS ex. SHUTTLE 540

8.42 Minutes after E.R. event



**COMMs. LINK – UNAVAILABLE**

**RELAY – NOT FOUND**

**LOCATION – UNKNOWN**

**CURRENT TIME – UNKNOWN**

**STATUS – BLACK**

“What happened?!” a tall, lanky man asked. He scrambled about the deck searching for his wire-framed glasses, found them, and pressed them up onto his nose. He pushed against the floor and rose through the air. Zero gravity took some getting used to, but he had learned to navigate the ship with little difficulty. He made his way over toward another man; this one was on his back, lying on the floor of the craft. His upper half was obscured by the bulk of an electrical console. The sound of a socket wrench clicking and the occasional blue flash of a torch was the only response. “HEY! Did we make the jump?!” No reply. “AARON! WHAT HAPPENED!?”

“I don’t fucking know, John! SHUT UP!” he finally answered, the sound of his voice muffled by the bulky machinery that separated them. Another blue flash illuminated Aaron’s torso, followed by an unhealthy burst of electrical sparks. Based on the enraged swearing, followed by fist thuds from within the console John could only assume that the repairs weren’t going well. He slowly backed away, eager to avoid being caught in the engineer’s fury. He left the cockpit, and floated down the small hallway that led to the living quarters: a large rectangular space. The walls consisted of large white plastic panels. On each panel hung a rectangular blue sleeping pad, complete with straps and snaps to secure sleeping scientists and soldiers in zero-G slumber. Several panels were torn off the walls, uncovering a mess of wires and smoking circuitry. A man sporting a crew cut and fatigues floated in front of an exposed bundle of wires. He held a wire between his teeth, a soldering iron in his right hand, and a set of wire snips in the left. John stopped and did a concerned double take.

“...um...Shane? ...Do you have any idea what you're doing?” he asked tentatively.

"I 'ave no clue" Shane said through the wires in his teeth. Yet he continued fussing with the electric clutter.

"You're not a mechanic, Shane. Let someone who knows what they're doing mess with that, before you fuck something up." Shane spat out the wires, but never bothered to turn and face the man.

"I graduated with honors on the Dean's list, was top of my OCS class, and have two doctorates! I can figure out a friggin' circuit board!" John almost argued, resisting the urge to debate the legitimacy of his degrees, when Shane flicked an ominous red switch. After a moment a slight breeze flowed through the craft. The ventilation fans came back online. Shane spun around with a huge smile and triumphantly fired two middle fingers at John, which he began to bobble up and down.

"sssssSSUUCK IT, JOHN!" He proceeded to make some more impolite victory gestures. John rolled his eyes and shoved off a bulkhead, propelling him toward the opening in the back of the cabin. The portal led to a small galley. Attached was the mess, large enough to hold the entire crew. He continued through the room and sailed through another opening in the rear bulkhead. It led to a smaller room. There were a few consoles and monitors, but otherwise it was empty. A large air-tight hatch adorned the floor, painted with black and yellow stripes. He planted his feet on either side of the hatch and pulled upward on a red handle. The door hissed as John pulled the lever and snaked himself through. The air was hot, thick, and filled with a gray haze that reeked of burning engine oil. Several men shot around the room turning wrenches and sealing air leaks. The lights were all out, making it nearly impossible to see. Each man had a light stick strapped to his chest harness. The combined flashlights produced just enough light to let them make their way around the electronics and machinery without injury. The fans kicked on, and the haze slowly cleared.

John meandered through the men and machines and floated over to a bulky man, with jet black hair, who was busy cutting wires before stripping them and splicing the bare copper ends together. His callused hands repeated the task for several minutes on an assortment of different colored wires. He acted with the skill and precision of someone with an intimate knowledge of the machine.

He severed one more green wire, and connected it to a black lead. The lights in the room slowly flickered on. The large man stood back and took a long sigh. He finally noticed the new arrival. He merely shook his head at John.

“That bad huh?” John asked, still floating in place.

“I never seen anything like this. Half the ‘lectrical systems are fried beyon’ recognition, the other half got out completely unfazed. It don’t make any sense. Any EMP or electrical storm woulda’ shorted every system on board, but only certain things got hit. The engine was goin’ haywire like nothing I ever saw. The bridge drive was puttin’ out ‘nuff juice to cook us in our own hull. We hadda’ vent the fucker TWICE before it was cool enough to get a man in here.” He stopped and shook his head again, defeated. “Ma’ best guess at this point is that every governing system on board *jus’ so happen* to fail at the exact same time. But even that don’t explain half a’ the weird ass electronic readin’s we picked up post-slip.” John barely understood half of that. He just flew the damn thing, and his knowledge of its systems was limited to that role.

The brass was so paranoid about this stupid ship. John didn’t even want to know how much it had cost. The vehicle was state of the art experimental military tech, so secret that no one member of the crew would have *complete* knowledge of its systems. Needless to say, this often made running it very difficult, especially given their current predicament. It became commonplace to joke that they were going to be shot when they got home, regardless of their success, solely to ensure they would never talk about it. Such black humor often got some chuckles, but they all felt a cold dread afterwards. Believing the idea took little imagination. An angry voice broke out over the din.

“We didn’t even fucking go anywhere!” The man had moved in front of one of the very few and very tiny portholes in the craft. John pushed himself over to the window, and peered out, beholding a strange sight. There was a little blue marble of a planet. Granted it *did* look similar to Earth; blue and green. But the land masses resembled no existing continents nor did the oceans match any on Earth.

“...yes we did.” He said, before taking off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“No, look! Earth’s right there. We barely moved at all.” John sighed and took his sleeve and wiped some condensation off the thick glass porthole.

“...can you name any one of the continents down there for me?”

“...what?”

“Try and name just one of those continents, or a body of water, anything.” The man looked suspicious, but turned his focus out the window. He pointed a finger and said,

“That, right there, is...uh...wait, no. It might be...um.” John could see the man piecing the puzzle together in his head, as he noticed the unusual land formations. “...yeah, ok that might not be Earth.” he conceded in confusion. He looked around to see most of the men had stopped to listen to the conversation. One of them spoke up.

“Well then where the hell are we?” The silence that followed allayed few concerns.

*\*Luke, SitRep.\** the voice over the comm was muffled by static, but it was clear enough to understand. The bulky man from earlier stood up and shouted back at the speaker,

“We’re stable, but the core drives are AFU. We ain’t goin’ anywhere fast.”

*\*Air?\**

“Scrubbers are back on, leaks are all patched. It’s duct tape and rubber bands...but it’ll hold.”

*\*All hands to the bridge \**

The men quickly filed out of the engine room, eager for some answers. Only one at a time fit through the hatch in the ceiling. The total crew of eleven eventually found a place for themselves in the rather cramped bridge, facing a tall bald man. It was tense and

quiet as they waited for him to speak. His voice was eroded by years of smoke and drink.

“Alright guys. I don’t really know how to put this lightly so I’m just going to say it....We’re completely fucked.”

~ Present ~

Celestia sat in her throne room, tall and proud. She was as regal and beautiful as the sunrise itself, smiling softly and patiently. On the inside, however, she felt like she could scream in frustration. Listening to some bureaucrat drone on about the defects in the Equestrian tax laws was about as entertaining as it sounds. Luckily, several millennia of experience had worked wonders for her ability to appear interested. She quietly amused herself by considering trying her hoof at professional poker, and for a moment her smile was genuine. It was quickly replaced by its false counterpart as Celestia remembered where she was. She wasn’t really paying attention anymore. This was more Luna’s department; her sister was the one who had written most of the tax codes anyway. And they had worked splendidly for the past thousand years. Why then did this bureaucratic know-it-all seem to think it needed fixing? She took a deep breath trying to suppress the urge to send him to the moon.

It wasn’t his fault she was in a bad mood. This had been a stressful week. It wasn’t every day you get a surprise visitor from another planet, let alone one hell-bent on dying in your hooves. She had exhausted herself fretting over that silly thing. She and Luna rarely stopped working at it, trying every viable spell and medical procedure known to ponydom. Each try was a gamble, sometimes they helped, other times they almost killed it. The medical procedures were nearly hopeless given they were created with ponies in mind, not aliens. It was utterly grueling. No matter how hard they tried, no matter how strong their spells, the beast refused to wake. Even the combined powers of the sun, the moon, AND the Elements of Harmony had been effectively useless. She was out of ideas. She had never really felt helpless before, and she didn’t like it at all.

A short painful buzzing began to sound inside her head. It surprised

her for a moment before she remembered what it meant. She had cast a spell designed to alert her of any significant change in the alien's vital signs, and she was rather proud of it. The magic was a fairly ingenious, but hearing it now brought her no joy. In fact, she hoped it was mistaken. She had dismissed most of her medical staff and a good number of her guards. After a week of virtually no brain activity the odds against the creature waking were astronomic. A poor nurse was down there with it alone, and one of two things was happening; it was dying, or it was awake. Celestia quickly stood up in the middle of the boring lecture and trotted down her throne doing her best not to look like she was in a hurry. She seemed to catch the rambling colt off guard and he quickly scrambled to bow.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Gray, but I just realized I *may* have left my sewing machine on fire." She darted for the nearest exit, leaving an extremely befuddled pony behind her. The moment she was clear of unwanted eyes she teleported up to her chambers and found a scroll and parchment, she jotted a quick note to Luna before setting the scroll ablaze. It dissipated into a thin cloud of smoke. It would appear in front of Luna in seconds, but Celestia did not have the time to wait for a reply. She teleported herself down to the hospital room, which housed the alien. She inspected the room. The life support machines were wrecked and strewn about the floor. The bed was empty. Celestia's sudden arrival scared the hay out of two guards who were attending to a slowly recovering nurse pony.

"Are you alright?" Celestia asked the nurse. She nodded, and held her head between her hooves. She was clearly suffering a massive headache but she seemed to be otherwise unharmed.

"What happened? Where is it?!" She demanded of the guards. They cowered a little under her gaze, but they both pointed a hoof down the hallway. "It got away?!?!" she sounded a little angrier than she had intended.

"We came running as soon as we heard the alarms going off ma'am. When we got close, it was already up. We tried to catch it. But it took off down the hallway, chasing after a purple unicorn filly." Celestia's heart froze.

"Twilight." She breathed. Terror rose in the pits of her stomach. It

was after Twilight Sparkle. Her most faithful student was in danger, and worse, it was Celestia's fault she was even there. Flashes of horrible scenarios flooded Celestia's imagination. She raced out of the room and down the hall following the echo of raised voices. She sped along using powerful strokes of her wings to boost her pace. Celestia heard the scream of a small, terrified filly. She instantly recognized it as Twilight's voice, followed by three explosive cracks, which echoed and bounced off the walls. Celestia's heart stopped. Her stomach wrenched itself in knots. Her eyes threatened to fill with tears as she feared for the worst. She launched her entire being faster than physically possible, her mind rebelling at the thought of Twilight coming to harm. She rounded a corner and saw a mess of guard ponies, some scrambling to their feet. Twilight stood looking out a broken window at the end of the hallway. Celestia filled with warm relief. Twilight was alive and well, yet the alien was nowhere in sight.

As soon as the sun goddess began to approach, the purple filly's horn glowed a bright white, and Twilight teleported away. Celestia leapt over a few guards to where Twilight had been standing, as if to try and catch her before she disappeared. She looked out the broken pane of glass and saw her pupil following a large flow of guards, which lead around the corner of the castle. Celestia opened her wings and soared out into the open air. She glided around the corner and spotted a purple dot among the golden armor. The sea of soldier ponies formed a semi circle against the castle wall. Trapped inside, the awake beast stood defiantly, weapon in hand. It then paced back and forth like a trapped wolf. Celestia teleported herself down next to Twilight.

She observed the creature up close, and the alien returned the favor. Celestia didn't move for fear of further spooking it. He began to scan the ocean of guards that blocked him in on all sides. He stood to his full height, almost as tall as Celestia, perhaps still a hand or so from being eye level. His breathing became more regular, and it appeared he was finally calming down. He looked up at Celestia's sun as though he had forgotten where he was. He scanned the skies, as if he were any ordinary pony enjoying the lovely day. He lowered his gaze and locked eyes with Celestia, clearly recognizing her as the authority of the group. His formerly

peaceful visage dissipated and his face became defiant, expressionless mask. He didn't even blink. His gaze was narrow and flinty. He flicked his stare over to the purple mare at Celestia's side. His eyes softened and betrayed sadness, but the moment did not last.

The creature sucked in a large breath, as if he were about to plunge himself into cold water, and shut his eyes. Celestia saw the black steel weapon in his hand rise towards his own head. The creature pressed the barrel of the weapon under its chin, and its intentions immediately became clear. Twilight yelled out a desperate cry, and Celestia swept a protective wing over her protégé. She saw the creature's eyelids shut tight as it began to squeeze the trigger. Her own eyes widened as she beheld the weapon glow with an aura of purple blue haze which shimmered like the night sky itself. It jerked out from under the alien's head the moment it fired. The bullet still tore through the alien's cheek, leaving a bloody furrow in its wake. Celestia could hardly believe her eyes, as Luna forced her way through the guards, horn glowing and eyes black with anger.

The cloud of deep blue magic engulfed the alien, telekinetically forcing him to the ground with brutal power. Celestia felt tears wet her coat where Twilight clung to her mentor like a foal would its mother when it was frightened. Celestia raised her wing and allowed Twilight to view the scene for herself. Instead the frightened mare continued to bury her face into Celestia's coat. Celestia returned her gaze to the scene playing out in front of her. The beast squirmed on the ground, fighting Luna's magic with every ounce of his strength. Luna broke through the line of guards and furiously stormed into the small clearing.

"NO! You are NOT done here yet!" she commanded with condescending venom. "Do you have any idea how much work I have put into you?!" Celestia felt a twinge of pity for the confused creature. Luna rarely lost her temper, but when she did, it was best *not* be in her path. The beast was forcing itself against Luna's spell with defiance that, even Celestia had to admit, was impressive ... foolish...but impressive. He managed to push himself to his knees. Luna's horn glowed even darker as he was crushed back into a prone position. The alien grunted painfully, clearly tiring from



fighting Luna's spell. It eventually ceased pushing and fell to the ground defeated and breathing heavily. "There, now, was that so hard?" Luna brightened a bit. As if to merely irritate his captor, the alien began to, once again, resist Luna's spell, which she had no trouble holding. Luna's expression betrayed her severe annoyance. "You *REALLY* don't know when to quit do you? Very well, have it your way." Luna's horn flashed and the alien's eyes rolled back into its head as it collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Twilight had returned her attention to the scene after hearing Luna's voice. She and most of the guards stood back, jaws agape. Luna telekinetically lifted the alien off the ground and trotted back into the castle with the beast in tow as if he were nothing more than a puppy that had escaped its master's supervision. The guards looked at each other with a "what the hay just happened" expression on their faces. About half scurried after Princess Luna while the other half looked to Celestia for guidance. She quickly composed herself and ordered most of them back to their posts. She knew she would eventually have to explain *what* exactly they had cornered, but that could wait for a little bit longer. This was only the beginning of a political nightmare, the likes of which Equestria had never seen. Now that the excitement had died down a bit she could only dread what she saw in her future.

A bright Rainbow blur landed with a thud in front of Twilight and Celestia. Dash bolted over to a still dumbfounded Twilight and began firing off questions at the dazed mare.

"Twilight, are you ok?! What happened? What's with all the guards? Did IT get out?!?! Did you catch it? Did it eat somepony? Are you gonna..."

"Rainbow Dash." Celestia cut the rambling pony off. "Why don't you take Twilight, gather the others and I'll meet you all in the lounge shortly." Celestia spoke calmly, but the tone of her voice indicated that it was not a request. Rainbow looked from Celestia to Twilight, who still appeared a bit dazed. Dash noticed how distraught her friend seemed and she nodded.

"Yeeeah... C'mon Twilight, let's go get the girls." Dash was clearly doing her best to comfort her. She draped a pale blue wing over the

mare and walked her back toward the castle. Celestia now stood alone with the few remaining guards. She ordered them to follow her, and she too headed back inside the castle.

~7 DAYS PRIOR~

“Yeah, I think most of us have already riddled that out.” said a rather small man with a receding hairline. “What I want to know is HOW we got lost.” The bald man answered him.

“From what we can tell, something went wrong with the bridge drives halfway through slip. The gate opened and we got through no problem, but then we started picking up these massive spikes in energy. Before we could even think we had already lost half our electrical systems. Without the governors the bridge drives started outputting more power than we thought even possible. Luckily the fail safes did their jobs, and shut all the power to the engine room. Unfortunately, that meant shutting down; boosters, scrubbers, and stabilizers. We dropped out of slip, now we’re here. I suppose we should be happy to be alive.” There was a tense silence as the men processed the situation. Shane finally spoke up.

“...You know I gotta be honest, I *totally* saw this coming.” A few men let out a bit of desperate laughter. The off the wall statement lightened the mood despite the macabre circumstance. “I mean come on.” He continued with a twisted grin. “The first manned voyage into a wormhole...who expected it to go off without a hitch? I’ve seen the movies, this shit happens every time.”

“Can anyone explain to me, why the most advanced vessel on *or off* Earth, on one of the most important voyages in human history, gets outfitted with governors that fail mid slip. Who the hell's brilliant idea was it to stick us with cheap guidance systems?”

“...the Department of Defense.”

“...welcome to the suck.” The men shared a tacit agreement. An older man with patchy gray-brown hair had remained quiet through the whole discussion. He moved in front of a large yellow monitor that flickered with occasional static, and he began pressing keys. He continued typing while the rest of the crew discussed the

possibilities of repairing the ship for an attempt trip home.

“We can’t get home if we don’t now which direction home is.” One man pointed out.

“It doesn’t matter what direction home is. All our navigational systems are fried, the ship is barely holding together as it is, and I wouldn’t trust the bridge drives as far as I could throw them.” They continued to bicker for several minutes. Then the older gray haired man turned around and announced in a rather disappointed voice, “...I know where we are.”

Every man in the room ceased speaking. The bald man, who was in charge of the group, responded.

“Well, Thomas, feel free to share with the class.”

“Look,” Thomas began to once more type on the monitor. He brought up several galaxy maps. All of which had “NO MATCH” stamped across the front, except for one, which he pointed to. “I took a scan of our current position. I cross referenced it with every known galaxy and solar system we have mapped. Not one single match.”

“Get to the point, Tom.” Thomas shot him a disapproving stare, before continuing.

“We dropped out of slip space into the wrong universe” he plainly stated.

“...another universe?”

“Yes.”

“That is some science fiction bullshit” a young man in fatigues declared angrily.

“How many universes are there, 'cause last time I checked we only had the one.”

“Possibly infinitely many, maybe just these two. I don’t know.” Thomas continued, unfazed by the comments. “What I *do* know is

that we are no longer in our own universe. It's the only explanation I can think of that makes any sense."

"The hell you talkin' about? That don't make any sense at all! How can ya just *leave* the universe?" demanded Luke.

"Whenever we open a worm hole we create a field that is powerful enough to fold space-time over onto itself. The idea behind those bridge drives down there," he pointed a finger at the floor in the direction of the engine room, "...is to jump from one point in space time to another...it's like... let's say there are two dots on a piece of paper and you need to get from one to the other. Rather than drawing a straight line, you fold the paper and touch the two together instantly. That's the theory behind an E.R. bridge. Now if we take that theory and apply to a multiverse premise of reality then you would have to add several layers of paper on top of 'our' piece, to represent 'other' realities. *Now* when you went to fold the two dots together, you would first have to go through several other "universes" before you got through to our own. My guess is that we either overshot or undershot the mark."

The explanation left most of the men more confused than when he had started. Most of these guys were soldiers or technicians, not astrophysicists. "Which leads me to my next point." Thomas continued. "We need to leave as soon as possible."

"No shit. We all wanna get home."

"You don't understand. We *shouldn't* be in this universe. We need to get back to our own universe, before we royally screw up both." A panicked desperation colored his voice.

"What are you talking about?"

"Look, we don't *belong* in this reality. As far as our current understanding of physics goes, what were doing right now is impossible. Conservation of matter just flew out the window! God knows how many other "laws" we've broken!"

"Wait, how does our bein' here endanger the universe exactly?" Luke asked. Thomas threw his hands up in the air, struggling to find

the right words. He finally continued.

“What happens when you fill a balloon too full with air? It pops.”

“...universes can pop?”

“I don’t know, but to be perfectly honest I don’t want to find out. You guys have to understand that we’re in completely uncharted territory here. Once we go past that singularity, the rules all fly out the window. Our ‘rules’ our, ‘laws’ could be completely meaningless here. It would certainly explain the bizarre readings were receiving. I *don’t know* what could happen. Maybe our being here won’t change anything. But there is no precedent to draw from here.”

“But we’re already here. So that means we already know this universe is safe to occupy” Shane speculated.

“Not necessarily. If you were to wander out onto a frozen lake and manage to NOT fall through the ice, do you think ‘Oh I’m already here, therefore I am free to act as I wish,’ and start jumping up and down? No. We need to make as few waves as possible or we may accidentally erase time or rip apart space.” The men stood quiet for a moment, realizing the gravity of the situation. A muscular man wearing a blue jumpsuit pushed himself over to the yellow screen and began staring at it. He looked as if he were trying to decipher a forgotten language. He pressed a button and a live feed began to play of the blue planet below. He rewound the feed to when they first arrived. He then played it forward again. He stared at the video for several minutes. He finally spoke, his attention never leaving the monitor.

“Uh....Colonel?”

“What is it, Allan?” Answered the bald man.

“You might want to look at this.” The Colonel pushed himself over to the monitor and positioned himself next to Allen.

“Watch this.” Allen said, as he started a poor quality video of the world they were orbiting. The blue planet was marbled with green and the occasional wisps of white cloud. They sat and watched the

video for a bit.

“What are you showing me Allen?”

“Watch.” He said as he rewound a few seconds and pointed to the sun, which was slowly receding behind the edge of the planet.

“...Yes, we call it the sun,” said the Colonel, unimpressed.

“You don’t see it?” Allen asked, slightly surprised.

“I see an extremely uneventful video.”

“Look,” he played the footage on a loop. “What is the Earth *not* doing?” The Colonel stared for a moment before his eyes narrowed as comprehension struck him.

“What the hell? ...It’s, not...” he mimed a turning motion with his hand, “spinning.” The Colonel finished.

“Exactly” Allen said, excitedly. The Colonel examined the stars that dotted the inky backdrop of space. He motioned a finger using the stars as a reference.

“The planet hasn’t moved at all...but the sun is still...setting.” The Colonel slowly struggled to grasp the logically impossible implications. “...which means,” He paused, and Allen finished the thought for him.

“...which means the sun is revolving, *around the planet.*” An uproar of arguing and shouting erupted among the men. Half darted to an unoccupied terminal and screens to witness the impossibility for themselves, the other half all struggled to make their opinions heard in an unholy shouting contest.

John made his way to the main console in the cockpit. He lowered himself into the pilot’s seat and, out of habit, attached the harnesses which secured him in place. He began typing at the console. He stopped when Shane lowered himself into the co-pilot’s chair. John turned to his friend.

“Do you think Thomas is right? Do you really think we dropped out

into another reality?” Shane reached back and scratched the back of his regulation crew cut head. He then took a deep breath.

“It all makes sense. So far it’s the only explanation I’ve heard that does. I never did much research on singularities, but it *does* fit the description; it even explains the screwed up planetary orbits. It’s just...” He seemed to struggle to find his words, “Inter-dimensional travel was only theoretical up until now. After the first few drones went through the bridge and came out fine on the other side, we kind of dismissed the theory of alternate realities. If he is right...” He shook his head, “I don’t know man, everything we thought we knew about the universe just got flipped upside down.” John nodded, confirming some inner thought, and continued typing at the monitor. He dialed up a large digital readout of the world they orbited.

“So that makes this an “alternate” Earth, right?” he asked, pointing at the digital imitation of the blue orb.

“...I guess.”

“So, do you think there could be intelligent life down there?”

“Honestly? I kind of doubt there’s anything more evolved than grass, and that’s pushing it.”

“Shane the optimist,” John teased.

“Shane the realist,” Shane retorted. “Think of all the happy coincidences that went down when *our* universe was formed. All these dangerously lucky sporadic events made life possible: To start, you need a planet with water, and that eliminates like ninety nine point nine nine nine nine percent of all the planets in the universe. After that you need a star that’s the *perfect* distance from the planet. Too far and it freezes, too close and it fries. Next you need a habitable atmosphere. After that you need there to be some trace of life; an amoeba, a bacteria, some primordial ooze, whatever. You need that life to evolve and survive for billions of years, until it grows into something intelligent. You need this huge list of requirements, each requirement having a “one in a trillion” chance of occurring. The more you think about it the more you realize how

incredibly accidental life is.”

John continued to fiddle with the screen in front of him. He stared at the digital copy of the little planet. He dangled a finger over a key and turned to Shane, a devious grin on his face.

“Fifty bucks says I find life.” Shane perked up at the challenge. He stared down the pilot and smiled himself.

“Hundred says you don’t!” he retorted confidently.

The finger dropped and the word “scanning...” popped up on screen below the blue image. John pumped a fist in front of the monitor and chanted,

“Life, life, life, life!!!” Shane immediately mimicked the gesture with his own jeer.

“Death, death, death, death!!!” The two men continued their childish cheering contest until the computer finished its scan. Words died as they beheld the results, and stared slack jawed at the monitor. “...that’s impossible.” Shane breathed, not even bothering to conceal his shock. John felt as though he had been punched in the gut. He hadn’t expected to see any life at all. The computer continued to flash results on screen. The bet was completely forgotten. John twisted in his seat and saw the crew still arguing and darting around the bridge.

“DOC! Get over here! Colonel, you’re going to want to see this too, sir.” Thomas pushed off a wall and floated across the bridge up to the cockpit. The Colonel followed shortly after shoving his way through the mass of arguing scientists.

“What’s wrong?” Thomas asked. Both John and Shane pointed at the screen. The two new arrivals scrutinized the results of the scan. Thomas’ mouth opened slightly, as if he were attempting to form words. The Colonel’s eyes widened.

“Jesus...” He said under his breath. The screen continued to flash the results. The slowly growing dark side of the planet was pockmarked with dots of light. In several places the lights were



concentrated in a thick bunch. “Thermal.” The Colonel ordered, and after a few key clicks the digital planet shifted from blue and green to ghostly black and white. The formerly blue parts had become a stark white. The land had faded from green to a dull grey. And the spots of lights had transformed into hot black dots. “Are those...” The Colonel trailed off.

“...Cities.” The three other men said in unison. Shane continued, “Sir, this planet is hot.” The Colonel gave no indication of having heard.

“We even picked up signs of a basic power grid,” John added. A few of the crew members had made their way over to investigate. Allen inspected the screen.

“Are those...”

“Yes.” The Colonel cut him off.

“So there are...”

“Yup.” This time Shane answered. One of the fatigue clad men pushed his way up to the monitor.

“There are people here?!” His voice hopeful and excited, “What the hell are we waiting for? Get them on comms. Tell them we need help!”

“Comms are down.” Aaron deadpanned from behind the group somewhere.

“NO!” Thomas barked, “...we are *not* interfering here!”

“Fuck that! We should try and land, maybe they can help,” he argued.

“I don’t think you *get it*, son.” Thomas turned on the young man, with an uncharacteristic amount of bite in his voice. “If we so much as *wave* at those beings, we could alter their flow of events in ways you can’t even imagine! You don’t seem to appreciate the ENORMITY the tiniest event can have on the timeline of a universe;

a universe that we were never supposed to visit in the first place! I, for one, *WILL NOT* have the devastation of an entire *world* on my conscience!" He slashed his hands through the air to illustrate his point. The young man shrank at the outburst.

"Uh...Colonel?" Shane spoke up tentatively.

"What?" The Colonel said while massaging his temples.

"All universe ending paradoxes aside, I think we should try and look at this from another perspective."

"What are you talking about, Major?" He said with annoyance.

"Well, what if we were back home and an unidentified ship came screaming out of slip space, heading for Earth, registering weapons, and not responding to any hail or comms? What do you think our first reaction would be?" The Colonel stopped rubbing his head and looked up, realizing Shane's point. Shane pointed again at the monitor. "If they're half as advanced as I think they are, they're going to pick up on us, *IF* they haven't already. I'd say were about one panicked button push away from swallowing a Titan missile." This line of reasoning seemed to have a much greater impact on the crew, who had yet to really consider the planet's perspective. "...and if we are going to try and get home, we need to try it now, because without those stabilizers, orbit decay is going to start becoming a problem in..." He looked down at his watch. He tapped the digital screen on his wrist a few times, before realizing it had stopped working. "...soon." He finished. That seemed to be all the motivation the Colonel needed. He rose and barked into the crowd of men.

"Luke!?"

"Sir?"

"Get this ship back online. We're leaving!"

"...aye sir." He said, clearly struggling to suppress his urge to argue.

"Everyone! ...get your shit squared and get ready for a jump."

“Sir?” John spoke up, “...if I may inquire as to *where* we're jumping?”

“The exact opposite of our original coordinates.” He answered plainly.

“I'm not sure if that's how *this* works, Colonel,” John tried to argue.

“Does anyone have a better idea?” The commanding officer challenged. No one spoke up. “Good, now get the ship running, I want this fucked up universe in my rear view in less than ten mikes!”

The crew scurried about the ship, stumbling over one another in their haste. Each man was busy manning consoles, or repairing fired circuitry. Despite the Colonel's persistent demands for a miraculous revival, the crew completed the job in roughly thirty minutes. The engines still sparked irregularly, but they seemed capable of sustained exercise without much difficulty.

The ship was poised and ready for the E.R. bridge attempt. Each soldier manned his station. The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife. The instant the Colonel gave the order John slammed a lever forward, the engines hummed, and the air filled with a palpable charge. The ship lurched forward. Had there been any windows, the men might have beheld a bridge opening in front of them. It was technically invisible, but the way it bent the rays of light around itself created an irresolute black sphere. They might have noticed its violent pulsations. It strobed into and out of existence, throbbing and wavering between imploding and exploding. The men realized something was amiss after the ship began shaking aggressively. Screens cut to black, lights flickered, and the air became noticeably hotter.

“What's going on?!?! Someone talk to me!!” The Colonel demanded from his fastened position on the bridge.

“Bridge drives are overheating!” One man shouted from his seat.

“CUT THE POWER!”

“We tried that already, it’s not responding!”

An explosion rocked the ship. It would have knocked them all to their knees had they not been buckled down. Red lights flashed inside the craft and an ear splitting alarm blared.

“THE FUCK WAS THAT?!” the Colonel demanded.

“The engines are gone! Fire on deck two!! Sir we just lost... everything...” a crewman replied. He quit his panicked work at the controls and threw his arms up in defeat. “The planet is dragging us down, sir. We’re going to hit the upper atmosphere in about sixty seconds.”

The men feverishly worked to try and restore power to the engines. The Colonel disconnected from the chaos. His face grew grave. It didn’t matter now, they couldn’t pull out of this. Soon the ship began to vibrate as it contacted the planet’s atmosphere. The craft punched its way through the upper layers of ozone and tore through the night air, straight toward the surface. Most of the men had stopped their work. They knew the score. It was over. This is how their story ended.

The Colonel took a small photograph out of his breast pocket and ran a finger over it. It was a little boy, no more than a year old. He was sitting on the grass with a large red toy truck. He was smiling at the camera, blissfully unaware.

“FIFTEEN THOUSAND FEET!” The man at the console yelled above the cacophony. The craft rocked as it hit a denser pocket of air. It screamed toward the ground.

“TEN THOUSAND!”

John held a fist out to his friend in the seat behind him. Shane connected his own fist.

“See you on the other side, kid.” Shane said sadly.

“FIVE THOUSAND!”

The Colonel raised his head.

“BRACE!!!”

The ship slammed into the ground. Its metal exoskeleton took the brunt of the impact, sending ripples through twisted metal. Dirt, fire, and smoke erupted in an enormous cloud of spray. Warped chunks of flaming shrapnel flew in all directions. The ship plowed through a small burg and continued to skid along the ground, gouging the earth and snapping trees like twigs. It carved a deep furrow in the soft soil, uprooting plants and crushing rocks. The ship began to drift sideways, finally lurching over onto itself, flipping on its back before continuing the roll into its belly. It ground to a halt. Its formerly grand appearance was now shattered and dejected. The pinnacle of human technology lay lifeless, twisted and hacked, in a fiery heap. Smoke billowed from the pile into the dark sky, toward the stars it once called home.

From her perch, the Princess of the night observed. She saw the machine fall, blazing, from the heavens. She spread her midnight blue wings, and took to the sky, veering toward the pillar of smoke and fire.

# ARTICLE 2 Part III

## ARTICLE 2

### Part III

By: Muppetz (!Gsih3Wfnlk)

Pinkie Pie concentrated intently on the cupcake sitting on the table before her. Focusing all her attention on the sugary confection, she twisted her head left and right, analyzing it from all sides. Her visage was cold and calculating. With surgical precision she inched her head forward and peeled back the paper cup that encased the base of the treat. The cake rested on the paper, bare. Pinkie Pie circled, stalking it like a tigress, awaiting the perfect opportunity to strike her prey. She crouched close to the floor. She crept up to the base of the table and slowly rose toward the top, until only her eyes and nose peeked over its edge. In a spontaneous pink blur the cupcake disappeared. To an untrained eye the only noticeable changes were Pinkies cheeks, engorged with sugary cake, and her lips, smeared with vanilla frosting. She slowly started chewing. Like a connoisseur of fine wines, she shifted the cupcake around her mouth. She rolled her eyes in contemplation, occasionally lifting a quizzical eyebrow.

Twilight magically lifted a teacup to her mouth. She was again glad to be a unicorn, because her hooves were still trembling. She couldn't shake her jitters. The events of late replayed over and over in her head, despite her best efforts. The day's shocks flashed in her mind's eye. She could still feel the icy metal against her throat; she could still hear the vibrations of his voice next to her ear. Her ever-logical curiosity questioned his apparent knowledge of the Equestrian language. However, it wasn't necessarily *that* he spoke, nor was it really *what* he had said that interested Twilight the most; it was *how* he said it. Something was in his voice, maybe fear, maybe desperation, she couldn't quite tell. One thing she was sure of; something had spooked him, bad. A book fell to the floor behind her; the leather bound tome collided with the marbled floor with a

loud smack. Twilight nearly jumped out of her seat.

“Rainbow Dash! Will you quit yah quit yer’ horsin’ around keep yer’ hooves on the ground fer once?!” Applejack scolded the colorful pegasus, who flapped down from the top of a bookshelf.

“My bad,” She murmured contritely. Twilight was still shaking. Fluttershy crawled up onto the dais next to her and wrapped a soft yellow wing around her. The warm atmosphere of the lounge coupled with the serenity that emanated from the yellow pegasus helped calm Twilight.

The room was dim; a small crackling fire provided soft, ambient light. Bookshelves lined most of the walls, and each shelf supported rows upon rows of ancient, dusty knowledge. The girls sat in front of the fire place. Several plush cushions and low easy chairs provided a quiet place to sit and read amongst the rows of literature. Twilight took in a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the room. It reminded her of her library home back in Ponyville and the connection helped her feel a bit better. She tried to recall Celestia’s lessons on meditation: a slow steady breathing technique; in through the nose, hold it for a moment, and out through the mouth. She repeated the process a few times and her heart lowered to steady rhythm. Yet she still felt a bit on edge.

“Are you alright Twilight? Fluttershy asked.

“I’m fine,” She replied, sounding far from confident. She held out a slightly shaking purple hoof. “It’s just the excess adrenaline working its way out of my system,” she rationalized to herself and anypony else.

“I simply can’t imagine how *dreadfully* frightening it must have been.” Rarity piped from her perch on a large cushion. “You’re absolutely certain it didn’t harm you, darling?”

Twilight nodded, her thoughts wandering. “I don’t think he ever wanted to.” Twilight said quietly.

“Uh, I hate to bring it back up, but didn’t he kinda hold you at knife point?” Dash pointed out, earning an angry glare from Applejack.

But the comment didn't phase Twilight.

"I can't explain it; maybe you had to have been there. He seemed... afraid." Twilight shook her head, grasping to find better words to explain the feeling to her friends.

"I'm sure he was." Fluttershy finally chimed in her soft tone. "Imagine how frightened the poor thing must have been!"

"*Poor thing?!* " Rainbow Dash exclaimed angrily. Fluttershy shrank behind her pink veil of hair. "That '*poor thing*' just knocked an innocent nurse out cold, held Twilight hostage, then beat the hay out of five guards, and Fluttershy feels sorry for it!" Dash threw her forelegs into the air. Fluttershy blushed but surprised everypony when she continued to defend her position.

"...well...think about it, I'm sure to him, *we're* the aliens. He must have been terrified when he woke up and found a world full of strange creatures chasing him."

"She has a point there, Dash." Applejack agreed. "If ya'll woke up on a strange planet and a bunch o' alien monsters showed up and tried to run yah down, would you have just let em' catch ya?" Dash folded her arms and grumbled under her breath.

"I don't think it's *us* he was afraid of." Twilight corrected.

"What do you mean?" asked Rarity. "What else could have frightened him?"

"I don't know." The purple unicorn admitted, still struggling to communicate the feeling to her friends.

"At least you got to see it awake." Dash complained as she hovered about the room once again. Twilight let out a blatantly sarcastic laugh.

"Yeah, *lucky me.*"

"Ah jus' don't understand what could'a had the big fella so troubled that he'd go an' try ta'...well..."



“...off himself?” Dash offered.

“...yeah.” Applejack finished. No one had an answer. The prospect of something so awful that the alien would rather die than face disturbed the girls greatly. They let silence fill the room; the longer it went on, the less willing the girls were to breach it.

Rainbow Dash continued to fly laps around the ceiling.

“...where the hay did the Princess go? We’ve been sitting here for like an hour” She finally said. They all agreed that waiting was getting more and more difficult to bear. Yet they all knew it was best to let the Princess act as she saw fit. So they resigned themselves to wait.

Silence fell over the girls again, each filly absorbed in their worried contemplation. The only exception was Pinkie Pie, who placed another pristine cupcake on the table. Once again she studied the confection. The girls cautiously observed for a few more moments before Rarity bravely spoke up.

“Pinkie, darling, what in the world are you up to over there?” Pinkie Pie looked up from her work. She wasn’t wearing her usual happy smile. In fact, she seemed rather upset.

“I’m trying to figure out why he didn’t eat the cupcake I left him” she huffed on the verge of tears. “What if...what if he didn’t like it” she sniffed, “...and that’s why he ran away?” She plopped down on her haunches and her pink hair started losing its tight curls, a dangerous sign the girls recognized instantly.

“Aw c’mon now, sugarcube. You make the best darn sweets in Equestria, and everypony knows it.” Applejack trotted over and nuzzled the side of Pinkie Pie head. Pinkie brightened slightly.

“Really?” She looked up at the orange farm pony. All the girls nodded encouragingly, voicing their agreement. Pinkie’s smile widened.

“Absolutely darling,” Rarity rose from her cushion and approached Pinkie Pie. “...and if you don’t believe us, well then we’ll just have

to ask him ourselves.” An excited grin spread across the pink pony’s face.

~~~~~

Celestia stalked through the castle corridors in search of her sister. Two dozen of the Royal guard accompanied her in an impressive formation. They hindered her progress a bit, but some small part of her was grateful for their protection. She did not fear the creature, but it *did* have a nasty habit of throwing proverbial monkey wrenches into her plans. She located her sister’s presence with a quick and easy spell. Luna’s aura blazed like a bright sun amongst dim stars. An unusual testament, given her position as the Princess of the *Night*. Luna was in the dungeon and Celestia felt a pang of dread. Nothing said “good first impression” like a dungeon. Yet the beast seemed to be doing everything in his power to be placed there. Luna’s presence suddenly disappeared.

After a moment of confusion Luna reappeared in her private quarters at the other end of the castle. Putting Luna’s peculiar behavior out of her mind, Celestia quickened her stride, and the guards at her sides kept pace. Celestia hurried toward another presence, one that felt foreign. She had no doubt what emitted that peculiar aura. Celestia wished she could simply teleport there but she did not like the prospect of abandoning her guards. She was confident the alien posed no threat against her power, but millennia of experience had taught her that the safer road was the one most wisely traveled. So she remained with her guards, albeit at a quickened pace, and soon they reached the castle prison.

The dungeon was a place rarely traveled by any other than guards or inmates, and it had seen its fair share of both. Although it was never an official prison, it did prove useful from time to time. Celestia entered the building and was surprised by the number of guards Luna managed to marshal on such short notice. At least six soldiers guarded every door, and a constant rotation of patrols roamed the hallways. They rushed out of Celestia’s path as she approached, lowering their heads in reverence until she passed.

Celestia approached the spot her sister had vanished from fifteen minutes ago: the maximum security wing. Unsurprisingly, there was

a distinct lack of Luna. There was, however, the commander of the royal guard, whom Celestia approached with relief. He stood outside a thick steel door with nearly a platoon of guards.

“Commander.” She greeted the armored stallion.

“Princess.” He replied, with a small bow. He never directly faced the Princess but instead kept his gaze fixed on the large door.

“What exactly is the situation, and where has my sister gone?” She knew the answer to the latter question, but she hoped he could shed some light on Luna's movements.

“I just got here a few minutes ago myself. Princess Luna sent a priority message ordering myself and as many troops as I could get over here as soon as possible. I showed up with the entire fifth and here she had our little *visitor* out of bed, lookin’ like he’d been dragged through hell, lying unconscious on the floor. She said she needed it secured and left the thing in my care. Then she said she had to go “*get some things*,” and disappeared!” The commander barely concealed his aggravation, and Celestia couldn't blame him.

“You have it locked up?” She asked, her heart filling with even more dread. All hopes of a civilized first contact between two species fluttering out the window. He nodded.

“Not that we had much choice. Come see for yourself.” He walked the Princess over to the metal door and slid back a tiny rectangular section, revealing a small window. The room was large and its walls were padded, clearly designed to contain the nastiest of inmates. The alien leaned against the far wall. Its two forelegs were secured with thick steel braces that were bolted to the wall with heavy chains. It was a sorry sight. His head fell against his raised left foreleg, and Celestia noticed a large U shaped mark on his face near its forehead. The mark was swollen and the skin was split open in some places. The occasional drop of blood streaked down his cheek, accentuating his depressed countenance.

“What happened there?” Celestia asked, indicating the corresponding spot on her own head. The commander sighed.

“Right after Princess Luna left our friend here decided to try and wake up. Apparently he wasn’t in the best of moods because it took six of us just to hold him down. Without Luna here to put him back under...” He held up an armored hoof and inspected a small smear of blood. “...we had to improvise.”

“Was that really necessary commander?” The princess asked, hopeful for the possibility of salvaging one scrap of a diplomatic interchange with the alien. The stallion finally turned to face the princess. He sported a large, obviously painful black eye.

“...yes.” He said, with a twinge of sass that she wouldn’t have tolerated from any other pony. He took one last look through the tiny window before pushing the iron slide back into place. “He’s got some fight in him, I’ll give him that. But the poor bastard doesn’t seem to know when he’s been beat. I don’t know whether to respect or pity him.”

Celestia’s eyes wandered over to some of the guards filling the hallway. She noticed one nursing a bloody nose and another examining an awkwardly-hung wing. Celestia offered to heal the commander’s eye, but he refused and insisted that his own healers were more than capable of dealing with minor injuries. With that Celestia began issuing orders, trying to rein the situation back under control. She ordered constant patrols of the perimeter and corridors. She divided the guards into three groups, staggering their watch duties so at all times at least two groups were on patrol. As soon as she was satisfied the level was secure she left the rest under the supervision of the commander and withdrew to hunt down her sister.

Celestia exited the dungeon and stepped out into her summer sun. She stood in the courtyard a moment, took in a deep breath, and savored the radiant heat from the sky. Celestia breathed in again and felt herself begin to unwind. She didn’t allow herself too much relaxation; there was still much work to be done. She disappeared with a loud pop and reappeared in her sister's bedchamber.

Luna's large and lavish chamber occupied the tower adjacent to Celestia's. Luna had unusual style when it came to decoration. Several of Luna's personal items stood out of place. Trinkets and

baubles dating back well over one thousand years ago, still garnished the room. They mixed themselves in with some of the more modern possessions Luna had accrued since her return. It gave the room a dual personality, that Celestia knew, many ponies actually found “creepy”. Celestia herself rather liked it. It seemed to have a wonderful balance. She admired the skill with which Luna embellished her quarters. She had paintings and artifacts, each of which held special meaning to the young princess. Some could now be considered ancient, but having lived just as long as her baby sister, Celestia recognized several of the pieces, and even allowed herself a moment of nostalgia. Luna did not, however, allow her room to be dominated by her past. Many modern pieces of art and furniture decorated the room. Celestia even recognized some albums from the bands that the kids were calling trendy these days.

Luna was darting back and forth gathering an assortment of papers, quills, and books.

“Luna?”

“Hellooo, dearest sister.” She said, in a sing song voice. She smirked widely.

“Luna, are you alright?”

“Of course! Isn’t this exciting?! Oh, think of all the things we’re going to learn!” Celestia recognized this part of her sister. Luna, ever the scholar. But Celestia had rarely seen her this enthusiastic. Granted, a situation of this magnitude had never presented itself before.

“Calm down, Luna.” Celestia insisted, amused by her little sister's eagerness. “...this situation needs to be handled very delicately.”

“Oh please don’t get all stoic and imperious on me now, Tia. I know you’re just as curious as I am!” she said, with a sly grin.

“Yes, Luna, I am curious. But we can’t let that interfere with our judgment on this issue.” Luna stopped skipping about the room and shot Celestia a quizzical look.

“What do you mean?”

“Think, Luna. How exactly do you see this playing out? How long can we keep this creature imprisoned against its will? How can we justify keeping it caged up solely so we can study it?” Celestia let the question hang in the air for a moment. Luna frowned.

“Are you seriously suggesting we let it go?” She said, her tone shimmering with skepticism.

“No.” Celestia quickly dismissed that idea, “...No, or ...at least not yet. Not until I can guarantee he isn’t a danger to himself or others. And so far he’s done a *splendid* job of proving otherwise.” Luna appeared put off by Celestia’s words, clearly unhappy at the prospect of being denied her prize. Celestia noticed this, and continued. “This isn’t the same as discovering a new breed of plant or examining a strange bug. This is an *intelligent* life form. It’s an entirely new species, one we know next to nothing about. It’s clearly a combative specimen. For all we know this is how they *all* act *all* the time. Perhaps that is how their culture functions. Or maybe this one is merely frightened and trying to find its way home.” Celestia paused for a moment to collect her thoughts; she feared she was beginning to ramble. “My point being, this thing is *not* from our world. And whether he likes it or not, he has just become the representative of his entire race. We can’t treat him like some science experiment.”

“We also can’t treat him like some foreign diplomat.” Luna retorted. “He’s not. But I can agree with you to an extent. Inter-planetary war is not something I wish to incite.” Happy they had reached a common understanding, Celestia nuzzled the side of her young sister’s head. After a moment of reluctance, Luna returned the affection. Celestia moved away and took in a deep breath.

“This turning out to be quite a week.” Celestia said, with a sigh.

“Indeed.” Luna responded, matching her sister’s weary tone. Celestia smiled down at Luna.

“I’m glad to have you back at my side, dear sister.” Celestia said with a slight hint of sadness coloring her voice. Luna smiled back

up at Celestia returning the bittersweet smile.

As if to ruin the golden family moment, a wisp of smoke wafted in through an open window, and with a dull pop materialized into a tightly wrapped scroll. It fell to the floor and both princesses stared at it for a moment. Luna pranced forward and telekinetically lifted the roll of parchment. The scroll unraveled itself in front of Luna's careful gaze. She only looked at it for a brief second before holding it up for Celestia's inspection. It read simply;

He's awake

Celestia recognized the Commander's penmanship. Celestia looked back up to see that her sister had continued stuffing papers and notebooks into her favorite midnight blue saddlebags with the crescent moon embossed in silver thread. She filled a side pocket with quills and another with a newly sealed inkwell. Luna squirmed into the straps that held the saddlebags in place. Once they were all fitted and tight, she experimentally flapped her blue wings a few times to make certain the bags would not interfere mid-flight. She shot Celestia an eager grin.

"We need to stop and talk to the girls first." Celestia said, instantly subduing Luna's excitement. She rolled her eyes and lowered her shoulders but her annoyance quickly vanished. She perked up and said,

"Fine, but let's hurry!" She bolted ahead and took the tip of Celestia's wing in her teeth. Her horn began to glow. Celestia realized what was about to happen, but she was too late to stop it. A blinding white light engulfed her, followed by a violent jerk on her wing and a flare of heat. The sensation faded just as quickly as it came, and Celestia immediately yanked her wing back from Luna.

"Luna, I *HATE* it when you do that!" She flexed her wing. It was sore, but seemed to be fully functional. She also noticed her stunning white coat was sullied with black scorch marks. "Oh, now look what you've done." A quick spell returned her beautiful white fur to pristine order.

Celestia scanned the dim lounge and knew immediately where Luna

had dragged her: there were the faces of six clearly shocked and confused mares. Twilight held a hoof to her chest and was breathing heavily. Fluttershy appeared to have sought shelter under Applejack. Rarity had a hoof clasped over her mouth where she had restrained from spitting out her tea. Pinkie Pie seemed to be the only one who remained unfazed by the sudden intrusion. She sat staring off into space, chewing on something, sitting next to a tiny pile of wrappers.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry girls.” Celestia started. “Things are bit... hectic right now.” The girls recovered from the intrusion instantly. Rainbow dash shot down and landed in front of the pair of princesses.

“Is it awake now?! Can we see it?!” she began firing off questions. One by one the girls joined in a cacophonous inquisition.

“Are you going to keep it?”

“Did it say anything else?”

“Girls...” Celestia said, raising a hoof to try and quiet the curious fillies.

“Will you send it to the moon??”

“How many ponies did it eat?”

“Aint’cha afraid it’ll git out again?”

“DID IT SAY ANYTHING ABOUT CUPCAKES?!?”

“GIRLS!” Celestia hated raising her voice, but it had the desired effect. The mares sat down quietly and waited for Celestia to speak. “Thank you.” She continued. “Now... Yes, It is awake, Luna and I were just about to go see it...”

“Great! Let’s go!” Dash began flying toward the door.

“No.” Celestia said as she used her magic to pull the colorful pegasus back down to a cushion. “You girls are not to go *near* that thing, not until Luna and I make sure it’s safe. Do you understand?”



Celestia's tone was still soft but she spoke with a voice that demanded nothing less than absolute compliance. The girls, of course, voiced their protests all at once. "This is not up for discussion, girls. Promise me you'll stay away. At least until we can be certain it isn't *actively* hostile." Celestia almost feared they would refuse, but the girls eventually mumbled their begrudging agreement.

Luna tapped her hoof impatiently. Celestia gave her an annoyed glance.

"I'm sorry girls, I know this isn't what you wanted, but this is how it has to be. I know you all want to help, but I can not risk your safety any further."

"We understan' Princess." Applejack spoke up. "We jus' wanna help any way we can." AJ smiled apologetically. Celestia smiled sweetly back at the orange farm pony.

"I know you do. And I'm certain your services will be invaluable. But for now, the castle is yours to enjoy...with the exception of the dungeons, of course."

"Wonderful! It's all settled. Now, if you'll excuse us..." Luna interrupted and pushed her sister toward the door. The girls made small bows as the two monarchs exited.

Once outside the hallway Celestia considered chastising her younger sister for being so rude, but Luna had already begun trotting down the hallway. Celestia followed and quickly caught up. She noticed that Luna had neglected to simply teleport herself to the dungeons. Celestia realized why when her sister began to speak.

"Why not just let them come? We could use them." Celestia agreed to an extent. They each had gifts that would be very useful in the coming ordeal.

"I can not risk it, Luna. The *only* reason Twilight Sparkle is even alive right now is because that thing *chose* not to harm her. I allowed the life of my most faithful student to be placed in the hooves of a creature I knew nothing about. If any of them had been

hurt..." Celestia shook her head. The idea sending shivers up her spine. "...I don't think I could live with myself."

Luna immediately sensed the shift in her sister's mood. The subtle signs would have gone unnoticed by any other pony, but over the years Luna had learned to read her sister. She had tells, even if they were understated. Celestia liked to believe her stoic facade had the world deceived, and for the most part it did. Except to those with the advantage of several millenniums of sisterly familiarity.

"Tia?" She asked delicately.

"...and it would have been all my fault. I should have never asked them to come here." Celestia continued as she walked. "If that thing had a mind to, it..."

"Celestia!" Luna interjected. Celestia stopped. Her sister held her gaze with steeled determination. "Listen to me. That was not your fault. *None* of this," She waved a hoof in an all-encompassing motion. "...is your fault. *You* did not ask *him* to show up. You did not bring him here." Luna's eyes bored into her sister's as she drilled the point home. "You have never led Equestria astray, dear sister. And the events of late would have been enough to break the will of even the most stalwart dignitary. *Nopony* can control fate, Celestia, not even you. What happened, happened, and there is nothing you or I or anypony can do about that. It is *not* your fault. You are doing what needs to be done." Celestia stared at the midnight blue princess. She had forgotten how poetic her sister could get. "We need those girls' help. You don't have to shoulder the weight of the world alone, Tia...Not anymore." Celestia blinked back the mist that began accumulating in her eyes. She moved forward and kissed Luna's forehead, before wrapping her in a tight hug. Luna draped her forelegs around her sister's neck and hugged back.

"Thank you." Celestia finally said, releasing Luna. "You always were good at cheering me up."

"It's my special talent." Luna said, with a wink as she continued to make her way toward the dungeon. "...that and the whole...you know... *moon* thing I do." She added with a dismissive wave of the

hoof. They both chuckled at Luna's lighthearted vivacity. In unspoken consent, they elected to walk rather than teleport.

As their destination grew closer, Luna's excitement began to visibly return. She quickened her pace once the dungeon was in sight. They made their way past guards patrolling in rank and file. Celestia craned her neck skyward and saw several squads of pegasus guards surveying the area in impressive aerial formations. She returned her attention to the ground to see Luna just pass through the entrance of the building. Celestia followed her inside as guards bowed.

Celestia felt her heart race; equal parts excitement and curiosity spurred her ahead. She and Luna approached the silvery steel door that they knew housed the alien. A muffled voice emanated from the other side, although it was difficult to determine its message.

The Commander of the Royal Guard maintained his post. The princesses approached.

"Hello, Aegis." Luna chirped, as she dug inside her saddlebags.

"Your highness." He replied with a small bow. Luna was one of the few he allowed to use his personal name. Celestia nodded to him.

"Commander" Celestia greeted, and he gave Celestia the same bow. Celestia took a deep breath. "So, How's he doing?" Aegis gathered his thoughts before responding. Celestia noticed his eye had been healed, although he still squinted.

"Well," He started. "...remember when it was unconscious?" Celestia gave him a confused look, wondering where he was taking this.

"...yes?" She cautiously answered.

"I kinda miss that." He replied with a hint of sarcastic reminiscence. "It hasn't shut up since it woke" the Commander added, as he moved to the door once again.

"What has it been saying?" Luna asked impatiently. A tower of paper lay on the floor, and a quill already scribbled away on the pad under Luna's magical influence. The Commander reached up

and massaged his head with a hoof.

“It’s been mostly just nonsense, the occasional ultimatum, and talking to himself. All sprinkled with ever increasingly creative swearing. I’m not entirely sure he’s...well...*sane*.” He moved a hoof up to the rectangular metal slide that covered the small window to the cell. The loud voice instantly poured out.

“...*the Voyager Project*’, they said! ‘*It’ll be great for you career*’, they said!” Its voice was unmistakably male, and from the sound of it, still very cranky. Celestia lowered her head a bit and peeked one of her shimmering pink irises through the hole. It was indeed awake. It punctuated every painful exclamation with a heavy yank on its chains. It continued ranting to nopony in particular.

“... ‘*This is some serious “Star Trek” shit, Shane.*’ OH! REALLY?? I DON’T SEE ANY FUCKING GREEN WOMEN, DAVIS! DO YOU?! NO!!! Instead, I’m chained to wall, on some ASS BACKWARDS planet being detained by MUTANT FUCKING HORSES!!!” He slumped against the wall. Celestia wondered if he had finally screamed himself out. But no. “If I get probed, I swear to God, I am going to beat the SHIT out of you!” The alien looked up at the door. He noticed the eerie pink eye gazing back at him. He shot up, his eyes wide and desperate.

“Hey! Lemme out!” He moved forward as far as the chains would allow. “Listen to me, you can’t keep us here! I KNOW you can understand me! Listen, you DON’T KNOW WHAT YO...” The words were reduced back to muffled vibrations as the commander slid the heavy block back over the window. Celestia looked at him as if to demand an explanation.

“Sorry, but statements like those,” He nodded in the direction of the door. “...are usually prequel to some rather...*descriptive* language.” The princess believed him.

There was something it had said, however, that concerned her much more than explicit language. She looked at Luna. From her sister’s worried countenance, Celestia knew she heard it as well.

“He still doesn’t know...” Luna said softly, a hint of sadness in her

voice. Celestia nodded.

“Princess?” the Commander queried, clearly not following the discussion. Celestia inhaled deeply. She exhaled and said in a voice barely above a whisper.

“He said ‘us’.”

~~~~~

Pinkie Pie sat perched on the edge of a tall stone tower. She teetered on the rim of its battlements but seemed to have no fear of falling. Wind whipped at her hair, tossing the tight pink curls about at its fancy. From her vantage point she had a magnificent view of the entire castle grounds. One section held her attention more than any other: the dungeons. She stared, unblinking at the tall black structure. She saw the formations of pegasi sweeping the sky and the royal troops on the ground marching about, ever vigilant. Her steadfast gaze never wavered. Her tail flicked back and forth, like a cat waiting to pounce.

# ARTICLE 2 Part IV

## ARTICLE 2

### Part IV

By: Muppetz (!Gsih3Wfnlk)

Celestia and Luna stood outside the cell, neither willing to speak. The commander of the guard stood by their side. Two dozen soldier ponies, clad in full armor, guarded both sides of the door. Luna knew this conversation was going to come sooner or later. Admittedly, she would have preferred the latter. She gave her older sister a concerned look, and Celestia returned it.

“We have to, Luna.” Celestia said, answering Luna’s question preemptively.

“I know, It’s just...this is certainly going to be awkward,” she said, brushing a lock of blue mane out of her eyes.

“He deserves to know,” Celestia said, steeling her voice.  
“Commander?”

“Highness?” He replied, happy to be back in on the conversation.

“Open the door.”

Aegis fumbled for a moment. “Your highness, I really do not feel that that would be wise,” he sputtered, eager to dissuade the Princess.

“I need to speak with it,” she stated calmly, as if she just wanted to take a relaxing stroll.

“You want to go INSIDE?! Princess I *really* must protest! It’s not at all safe, please allow somepony else to go in your place. It’s far too dangerous for either of you. Why don’t-”

“Commander!” Celestia interrupted him. She looked him in an

intimidating gaze. “We are *hardly* helpless little fillies! I appreciate your concern, and your protests are duly noted. So if you would, kindly *open the door*.” The seasoned guard shrank under Celestia’s gaze, but he would not back down.

Loud yet muffled shouting emanated from beyond the steel door, and all heads turned to face it. The Commander looked back at Celestia, concerned defiance written across his face.

“Now,” Celestia added.

Luna stood and watched the silent exchange that ensued. For a moment she feared the Commander might outright defy orders. But he slowly lowered his head in a disconsolate bow.

“Right away, your highness,” he said, defeated. He spun about on his hooves and turned to face the two dozen guards. He whistled loudly, and they all snapped to attention. The Commander tapped both sides of his forehead with a hoof and pointed it to the steel door. Without missing a beat, the guards lined up into two rows that perpendicularly flanked both sides of the cell. Anything that left that room would have to now go through a wall of armor.

Celestia followed the Commander to the gleaming steel door. He produced a complicated key, took it in his teeth, and inserted it into matching keyhole. He looked over at one of the unicorn guards, and nodded. The guard nodded back, and his horn began to glow a pale blue. The commander gave the key a twist. Tiny machined levers could be heard maneuvering out of place, along with the deep sonorous grinding of several large steel deadbolts sliding into an unlocked position.

Celestia stood by Luna as they watched and listened to the inner machinations of the large steel door working. The voice from the other side had fallen silent. Luna felt her heart beginning to beat faster as her excitement and trepidation reached a boiling point.

“Who’s going to be the one that tells him?” Luna asked, as she looked up at her big sister.

“Well, I think it-”

“Not it!” Luna interrupted Celestia, a large grin on her face. Celestia sighed and shook her head at her little sister’s childish tactic.

“Let’s at least *try* and get him to answer a few questions before we tell him. I doubt he’ll feel much like talking once he finds out.”

“How long do you think we’ll be able to stall him?” Luna asked. The door slowly opened inwards, sliding silently on oiled hinges hidden in the wall. Celestia brought her head down by Luna’s and spoke in a hushed voice.

“I don’t know. Just try and avoid the subject for as long as possible.” She rose back up to her full height.

The door opened all the way, and there he stood. He no longer pulled on his restraints, and he stared at the two alicorns in the doorway. His gaze occasionally flicked from one to the other. He was in poor shape, not that Celestia expected that to have changed since the last time she saw him. The hoof-mark remained on the side of his forehead. But it had stopped bleeding, as had the score across his face where the bullet tore through his cheek.

Celestia stepped over the threshold of the room as slowly as possible, taking extra care to make no sudden movements. Luna followed her sister inside. Despite Celestia’s attempts to appear non-threatening, the alien took a few cautionary steps back. He watched the two carefully, waiting to see what they intended. Celestia stopped in the center of the room, and Luna stationed herself directly to Celestia’s left flank. The three stood staring at each other for a few painfully long and awkward seconds. It surprised the princesses when it spoke first.

“Where are my men?”

“...so much for stalling,” Luna muttered under her breath. Celestia ignored her.

“How about we start with something easier,” Celestia suggested. “Do you have a name?” He didn’t answer right away. Instead he appeared to fight some indiscernible internal struggle. He looked around the room to ensure no one else was in earshot.



“Shane,” he finally choked out.

“Shane T. Doran?” Luna asked. He locked eyes with the dark blue alicorn, curious.

“...yes,” he answered, before hesitantly asking, “...how do you know my name?” Luna stuck her nose in one of her saddlebags. She pulled out a long silver chain, on which hung two metal tags. Seeing them, the alien patted his chest with his hands, realizing his necklace was indeed missing. With a flick of her head Luna tossed the chain to the creature, and he snatched it out of the air. He turned its tags over in his hands before slipping the chain around his neck and tucking the tags into his blouse.

“Well Mister...”

“*Major*,” he corrected. “At least give me *that* much,” he said under his breath.

“*Major* Shane T. Doran,” Celestia began again, “I can imagine this is all just as confusing for you as it is for us.” Celestia stopped when she heard chuckling, an unusual tone of sick desperation coloring the alien's crooked laugh.

“Lady, you have no idea.” She felt a tingle of indignation at being referred to as “*Lady*,” but she held her tongue.

She continued, “Yes, well as I am sure you have guessed we have some questions that need answers. Your cooperation will make things much easier on the both of us.” The creature's head hung low, frustration showing plainly upon his face.

“Save yourself the time. I can't tell you anything.” he said, rubbing his temples with the heels of his palms. Celestia expected some resistance from the alien, but she never expected him to be so rudely forward about it.

“Why not? I think we have a right to know a few things, like, oh I don't know...” Celestia tapped a hoof to her chin in mock contemplation. “What are you? And why have you crashed an enormous spacecraft into my country?”

“Yeah, because we did it on purpose,” he replied sarcastically before realizing what the pony had said. “Wait...*your* country?” He lifted his head and quizzically re-examined Celestia.

“Yes, *my* country. You landed in the sovereign state of Equestria. I am Princess Celestia. I rule along with my sister, Princess Luna.” Celestia nodded toward her sister.

“Hi!” Luna said, waiving a hoof to emphasize Celestia’s point. He stared pensively into the space between them for a few seconds.

“...you guys send princesses to interrogate people? I can’t tell if that’s incredibly stupid or really badass.”

“No, we don’t. However, you happen to be a special project of ours,” Luna explained.

“I’m *flattered*,” he said, the words dripping with cynicism. “But you still haven’t answered my original question.”

“And you haven’t answered mine.”

“I *can’t*.”

“Why?” Luna prodded.

“Because you were never supposed to know. I shouldn’t be here!” He gave a tug on his chains, anger slowly rising in his voice. “*None of us* are supposed to be here! *THIS...*” he moved his hands in large circles, gesturing the world in general, “was *never* supposed to happen.” He pulled on his restraints again with growing yet futile tenacity.

“What do you mean?” Celestia inquired, pressing him for a straight answer.

“We didn’t *want* to come here.” He visibly grew more and more uncomfortable.

“So you came to my planet by *accident*? ...How!?” Celestia added, disbelief obvious in her tone.

"I *can't* tell you! Don't you get it?!" Each of Celestia's questions upset him further. "I. AM. NOT. SUPPOSED. TO. BE. HERE! *We...*" he gestured a triangle, connecting the two alicorns and himself, "... were never supposed to meet."

He began to pace, not getting far given his restraints. He pulled on his braces with mounting frequency. Apparently explaining the situation only frightened him more. "I shouldn't even be *talking* to you!" He threw his arms in the air. "With every second I exist here, I am just making it worse!" The frustration in his voice was blatant; he was clearly irritated that the two alicorns didn't understand.

"Let us say you're telling the truth," Celestia humored him, "...and you arrived here solely by virtue of some freak accident. Why fight? Why run? If it was truly an innocent mistake then surely, you had nothing to fear from us."

"I wasn't running because I was afraid of you." He spat, rejecting the idea as if it offended him.

"Then why do it?!" Celestia demanded, thoroughly exhausted of his mystic, evasive answers.

"I'm *trying* to protect you!" He answered, just as hotly.

"Protect us from what?!"

"FROM ME!!!" He shouted. He let it hang in the air for a moment. "HOW have you not picked up on this yet?! I AM NOT FROM HERE! With my every action in this universe I disrupt the natural flow of events that *SHOULD* have taken place, had we not arrived here. Every breath I take in this universe is a *SIN* against the very laws of nature. Just my *presence* here is a threat to this world, my world, and the entire fucking fabric of reality as we know it!" He slashed his hands through the air to emphasize his point, rattling his chains.

Celestia and Luna let his cryptic words sink in. Celestia couldn't seem to puzzle his bizarre argument together. Luna, on the other hoof, lifted her head as her eyes widened with comprehension.

“*this universe?*” she repeated to herself. She looked at the alien, who had taken the brief silence as an opportunity to once again begin futilely fighting against the chains that held him in place.

“Celestia, I think he’s saying he came from another *dimension*.” Luna said, quietly. “What if they found a way to jump the streams?”

“...aaaannd the blue one finally clues herself in,” he muttered to himself, not bothering to turn around.

Luna was unfazed by the remark. She turned to Celestia, who was busy waiting for Luna to explain herself. “He thinks jumping the lifestreams will cause some universe ending paradox.” She let out a dry laugh, not because she found the situation funny, but simply because she finally understood.

Celestia finally saw a trace of the alien's reason. It was a backwards philosophy, but it made sense of his behavior in sort of pseudo-rational way.

Celestia looked up at the alien, who now braced both his legs against the wall. He was pulling against the chains shackled onto his forelegs. He struggled so hard he appeared to stand on the wall, parallel to the floor.

“What are you doing?” Celestia asked, trying not to smile at the spectacle.

“Struggling,” he grunted unequivocally.

“Why?” she asked amusedly. Shane lowered himself to the ground and turned to face the sun princess.

“Lady...”

“*Princess*.” It was Celestia’s turn to correct him.

“*Princess*.” He rephrased through gritted teeth. “As you may or may not have noticed, I am chained to a wall. That pretty much limits my options for entertainment to struggling or counting the ceiling tiles, and I’ve already done that... there are forty two!” He turned back around walked his rear legs up the wall, pitting every muscle

against the steel links. He ranted to himself again. "...could have gotten the universe of Swedish bikini models, but *nooooooo*, I get the land of colorful sentient horses."

"Ponies." Celestia corrected him again.

"Whatever!" he barked as he gave another heavy tug on the chains.

"If I release you do you promise to behave?" Celestia asked.

"I promise nothing!"

Celestia sighed as she nodded at Luna. The midnight blue princess' horn began to glow as she traced a large rectangle in the air. When the glow of her sister's magic died down Celestia's horn flashed quickly, and the metal braces on the alien's forelegs snapped open. He clutched at the air in the brief moment of weightlessness before he crashed to floor of the padded cell.

Shane groaned in pain as he rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself to his knees. He rubbed his wrists which were raw and chaffed from his constant thrashing. He reexamined the two princesses. His gaze quickly flicked to the door which the princess had "accidentally" left open. Celestia pretended not to notice. Even if he made it out the door, the two dozen guards would easily drag him back in. But that was not what Celestia had in mind. What he did now would give her a significant insight into its personality.

He smiled widely at the tall white sun goddess, then at the lunar princess.

"Well, your royal highnesses..."

*"Flattery. Oooh how manipulative of you,"* Celestia thought. She already had an idea of what he was playing at, and she couldn't help but smile back and play along.

"I do hope we can put some of these unpleasanties behind us and- WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!!!" He adopted a terrified face and pointed to the upper corner of the room behind the two alicorns. They both instinctively craned their necks to see what he was pointing at. "Suckers!" he shouted as he sprinted for the open door.

Celestia turned her head to see him collide, head first, into a bright white barrier that flared to life upon his contact. He fell flat onto his back in a very undignified manner.

“Muthr Fffknng sunvabch!!! Peess ov shhhht!” He clasped his face with both hands and began swearing even more loudly and incomprehensibly in obvious pain.

“Oooh yay! We found a spell that works!” Luna clopped her forehooves together in a giddy school filly fashion.

“Indeed. Quick, write that one down.” Celestia agreed. Luna pranced out of the room and returned with a scroll and quill. The feather scribbled on the floating parchment.

They returned their attention to the alien, who had stopped his pained swearing for a moment. He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. The cut on his forehead had begun to bleed again, not as profusely as before, but a drop slowly trickled down the side of his head. The U shaped mark from where the commander had “improvised” his version of Luna’s sleep spell had turned deep purple,.

“Are you going to be alright?” Celestia asked, restraining her amusement. He worked his jaw, shut it with a sharp click and gazed at the ceiling for a moment before answering.

“My head hurts,” he deadpanned. He stared angrily at the ceiling again for another moment. “Are you going to let me leave or not?”

“No.” Celestia answered, curtly.

“Why not?! I haven’t done anything wrong!” He pushed himself to his feet and began pacing the edge of the invisible barrier, occasionally poking it with a finger in various places, testing it. Each time his finger was pushed right back by a white flash.

“If you two *really* are ‘princesses’ here, then you obviously have levels of government. The fact that you even *have* this room tells me that you have some sort of justice system... Or that you are *really* into S and M, which I doubt. You kids don’t really seem like kinky

types.” He flicked his chains with a finger and they swayed with a soft clink. Celestia blushed at his implied meaning. Luna tried not to grin, amused by the off-color remark. “But I digress,” he continued. “You can’t keep me prisoner here forever.”

Luna pranced forward, a slyly smiling. “Oh come now. You aren’t a *prisoner*.” He looked down at Luna. “You’re more like...a trophy...or a pet.”

Shane's eyes narrowed as he stared daggers into Luna. She back stepped toward her sister. “He doesn’t have a very good sense of humor.” She pouted.

“I have a great sense of humor. I’m hilarious. *That* just wasn’t funny.” He defended.

“Well, Major Doran,” Celestia started, “you are correct. We do have a justice system. Unfortunately, our laws were not written with extra terrestrial creatures in mind. So, no, you are not bound by our laws. But neither are you protected by them. I can keep you here as long as I want.” She despised threats, but they were all he seemed to respond to.

He looked at Celestia. “So, what now? I sit here and wait to be dissected while you two let the universe rip itself apart?”

“I don’t think you have to worry about the universe.” Luna assured him. She was still slightly amused by his rather primitive philosophies of reality. “As for the dissection...well...we weren’t planning on one, but it is still *very much* an option, so I suggest you start to behave yourself!”

Celestia could barely keep her jaw from dropping at the sound of such threats coming from her baby sister’s mouth. She waited, heart pounding, for the alien’s reaction.

Celestia’s terror soon turned to wild confusion when the creature began to smile, as if Luna had just told the funniest joke he had ever heard. His smile widened revealing his front teeth. The knowledge that they were designed to tear flesh played in the back of her mind, but she put the thought aside and decided to deal with

it later.

He started to chuckle devilishly. Once he managed to contain himself he pointed a finger at Luna, and looked at Celestia. "I like her." He still wore a happy smile, with the occasional residual snicker.

Celestia had officially abandoned any attempt to find reason in the alien's behavior. "*Twilight Sparkle's pink friend made more sense than this...thing!*" she thought.

Luna smiled back at the alien, happy to have made a new friend. "You certainly are a peculiar species," she remarked. She faced her older sister. "Do you think they were all like this? Or did we just so happen to save the strange one?"

Celestia's heart dropped straight down into her stomach, and she shot Luna an alarmed look. Luna clasped a hoof over her mouth when she realized what she had just implied. They both turned to see if the alien picked up on Luna's error. Celestia's blood ran cold as she saw the look on his face.

His smile had completely evaporated. All former signs of happiness now quite absent from his grim visage; he now only looked confused, and worried.

"...What?" he asked shakily, "she said '*save the one*'." He approached the edge of the barrier and pressed his hands against it, making it glow dimly. "Where is the rest of my team?!" He demanded, worry growing in his voice. The two alicorns exchanged uneasy glances. There was no more avoiding it now. He noticed their hesitation, his worried expression turning to a terrified anger. "WHERE ARE THEY?!" He shouted, as he pounded a fist against the barrier. Celestia was dreading this. She inhaled a deep breath.

"I'm sorry." She started, her voice barely audible. "They didn't make it."

He stared back at them for a moment. "...I don't understand." He added, shaking his head. "*didn't make it?*"



“The ones you came here with,” Celestia tried to explain, “they... died in the crash. There was nothing we could do.”

“...which ones?” He tacked on desperately.

“...All of them.” Celestia had to swallow the lump in her own throat. She truly sympathized with the creature. He was rude and strange, but he had a good heart, and she *hated* giving good ponies bad news.

“*All of them?*” he repeated to Celestia. She nodded sadly. She then motioned to her sister. Luna’s horn glowed softly, and she pulled out ten more silver necklaces, each adorned with two matching metal tags.

Shane looked as if he had been bucked in the gut. He was so focused on the tags he didn't notice they were floating through the air. They passed the barrier and the alien grabbed the bulk of silver chain with a shaking hand. He held out the necklaces like they were a venomous snake. He rested one hand on his forehead before brushing it through his short buzzed mane towards the back of his head. He inspected the tags as if they held a secret to some all-important riddle.

“You were the only one we could save” Celestia solemnly explained.

He leaned against the back wall of the cell. He slid down to the floor and clutched the now tangled bunch of tags in his hands. He peered off into space, gazing at some distant unseen point. His mouth worked for a moment as if he wanted to say something.

Celestia felt it would be a good time for them to make their leave, and let the creature have a measure of privacy. She motioned for Luna to move towards the door and started for it herself. Luna looked back and forth between her sister and the alien. She started to follow Celestia out. Halfway to the door, however, Luna turned toward the alien who was still sitting on the ground, clutching the metal necklaces in his hands and staring off in the distance. Celestia stopped to watch her sister.

Luna slowly made her way across the room, passing through the

barrier unfazed. She stopped before the creature. He looked up at her. She could see the sorrow in his eyes, despite his otherwise stoic expression. She brushed the tip of her snout on his forehead.

“I’m sorry.” She offered. He didn’t acknowledge her gesture, but chose to return gazing at some far off point. Luna turned and strode past her sister and out the door. Celestia attempted to swallow the lump lodged in her throat.

She followed Luna out the exit, and the silver door sealed shut behind them. Celestia stepped back out into the hallway, absentmindedly following her little sister. Many new questions swam in her head, most about how to proceed now that she had a basic comprehension of the situation. She was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she failed to notice Luna had sopped walking, and narrowly avoided bumping into Luna’s flank. She looked up and saw the commander staring at the two.

“Well?” He was doing a poor job of concealing his curiosity. “Did he talk?”

“Technically yes, he did.” She replied.

The commander was clearly discontent with the half answer. “*Technically?* What did he say?”

Celestia took a deep breath, trying to find the right description for the strange beast. “He was very vague. He refuses to answer any question directly. He is very clever, and exceedingly stubborn.”

“Come to think of it, you two would probably get along quite well.” Luna teased with a playful poke. The commander ignored her.

“Did you...you know... tell him?”

“Yes.” Celestia answered somberly.

“How’d he take it?”

“As well as I suppose anypony could when receiving such news.”

“Did you get anything important out of him?”

“He was quite...” Luna twirled her forehoof in a small circle, as if to try and capture the right word from thin air.

“Odd,” Celestia finished for her.

“Indeed,” Luna agreed.

The commander was unsatisfied. “Odd how? Where is he from? Why is he here? How did he get here?” He piled on the questions.

“He doesn’t seem too sure himself. He made it very clear he did not come here by choice.” Luna paused, “We think he may have jumped the lines from another universe.” Luna explained.

“*Another* universe?” The commander repeated. “As in...a universe, other than this one?”

“Yes. That is what is traditionally meant by the word ‘another.’”

“And by *accident*? You don’t *accidentally* jump lifestreams! It’s not even possible.”

“Theoretically, it’s very possible,” Celestia explained. “It’s just... nopony has been able to devise a spell able to do it. Logic dictates it can be done,” Celestia looked back at the steel door, “apparently they found a way.”

~~~~~

Rarity trotted up the castle steps, admiring how the setting sun accented her new outfit. Her new crystal pumps glittered in the fading sunlight, and dusky orange rays played upon her red satin dress. She was quite satisfied with herself. She had been in Canterlot for almost five days and she had yet to even step hoof outside the castle walls.

“Ah don’ see why I even needed a new outfit.” Applejack complained, staring distastefully at the shopping bags that Rarity had saddled on her.

“Because, darling, you are an honored guest of the royal family, and seeing as we may be staying for some time, I expect you to start

dressing like you belong here.”

“Why did *I* have to come?” Rainbow Dash whined, hovering above the group.

“Because *you* are just as bad as she is,” Rarity pointed a hoof at Applejack, “...maybe worse. I mean really, Rainbow Dash, you would have such a lovely mane if you would just brush it every now and then.”

“Hurry, Rarity. The princess is probably done...” Twilight looked around nervously, before continuing in a hushed voice, “...meeting our *friend*.” Twilight’s pace quickened.

Getting AJ and Rainbow Dash looking half civilized was the stated objective of the shopping spree, but Rarity also used it as an excuse to force Twilight out from the dark of the Library and into some sunshine.

“Our *friend* is locked in a cell, darling. He isn’t going anywhere,” Rarity assured. Twilight spent the majority of the errand checking the time and fretting about returning to the castle. Rarity did her best to help the poor dear relax a bit, but admittedly she had her hooves full reining in Rainbow Dash while forcing Applejack into a dress.

“How are you so calm about all this?” Twilight demanded.

Rarity looked back at Twilight with a sad smile.

“Darling, I’m more worried than I have ever been in my entire life.”

“I’m not.” Rainbow interrupted, boastfully.

Rarity shot her a disapproving glare before trotting over to Twilight, and continuing, “but I learned a long time ago that fretting over something you can not control does nothing but aggravate your frustration. Besides, a *lady* must always keep her composure, even during the most trying ordeal.” Rarity gave a shake of her styled mane to emphasize her point.

Twilight smiled at Rarity’s exuberance. To any other pony, her

behavior could often be misconstrued as conceited or snobbish. But any of her friends would testify that there was nothing further from the truth. One would have difficulty finding a more giving or charitable soul in all of Equestria. Twilight knew that Rarity was only trying to help her unwind the best way the fashionista could.

Twilight tried to relax, but there was simply too much to do besides wasting time shopping. She was relieved when the group finally elected to return to the castle. The sun had begun to set, and soon Luna would raise the moon to bring forth the night. Twilight was eager to get back to her place by Princess Celestia's side, and she was also anxious to see if Fluttershy had received any updates. The shy yellow pegasus chose to remain at the castle while the rest of the girls went shopping, much to Rarity's disdain. None were really surprised; Fluttershy was hardly the "hit the town" type, not to mention her reluctance to reappear on the fashion scene after her rather unsavory days as a model.

They had tried to invite Pinkie Pie, but her behavior lately had become strange, even by her standards. She appeared only sporadically; apparently she had been spending most of her time in the castle kitchens, doing Celestia-knows-what.

Twilight doubled her pace, vaguely aware of Rainbow Dash arguing with Applejack about who would win a race back to the palace grounds. This inevitably led to an argument about whether or not wings were fair use. Twilight rolled her eyes and mentally blocked out the debate, trotting ahead to catch up with Rarity. The castle was growing closer with each step.

~~~~~

"What now?" Aegis inquired of the two princesses who still clearly contemplated their conversation with the alien. Both were distant, lost in their own thoughts. He couldn't blame them; he imagined something of this magnitude had never occurred before, even during the two alicorns' seemingly infinite reign.

Luna looked out a window high up in the wall of the stone hallway. Dusky scarlet light poured through in a soft beam of evening illumination.

"I'm afraid I must take my leave for the moment," she stated, disappointed. "Night is approaching and the moon isn't going to raise itself."

Celestia nodded. "Go ahead, I'm going to try and find the girls. They're probably eager for some answers. I'll meet you back here when you're finished."

Luna nodded back, satisfied with the plan. She turned with a flick of her long blue tail and began to trot down the hallway toward the exit. Each guard lowered his head as the princess of the night passed.

Aegis watched Luna slowly disappear around a corner. Celestia spoke to him. "Commander."

"Ma'am?" He answered, eager for any order.

"I am going to visit with Twilight Sparkle and the other Elements of Harmony. It's probably a little late for this, but I'd still like to try and keep this as quiet as possible. Have you heard any word about how the public are reacting to that little *display* earlier?"

"If by '*display*', you mean an extra terrestrial rampaging through the castle courtyards... then yes. Such a thing is rather hard to miss. Luckily for us, most of that area was used by medical staff, and since you had the hospital wing locked down, very few civilians saw it. So far the most popular rumor seems to be that a strange new *pet* of Luna's escaped the castle before it was cornered by her guards." He let out a dry laugh.

Celestia sighed in relief. "At least they aren't panicking in the streets."

"Yet," he cautioned, "you know this is going to get out eventually."

"Yes," she continued somberly, "however, until that time arrives, try and keep things relatively low-key. I must meet with the Elements of Harmony. I leave the situation in your capable hooves, Commander."

"What am I supposed to do with him?" He gestured toward the cell

door.

“Try and see to it that he’s comfortable. He’s had a rough day too,” she said with a hint of gloomy humor.

“So... what, we’re friends with this thing now?” He asked, irritated.

“He is not our enemy, Commander. Of that much I am certain. However, as unfortunate as it may be, I am afraid I must keep him *contained* for the time being. He is not our prisoner. But he will stay here, until I deem otherwise.”

“Highness.” He bowed his head in compliance.

With that Celestia turned and started down the hallway, toward the exit. She stepped outside to see the last rays of sun sinking below the horizon, elongating the shadows that danced along the ground.

Luna would soon raise the moon. Celestia wished she could be there to witness her sister bring forth the night; although Celestia had seen it countless times, Luna conjured a breathtaking show. No matter how skillfully Celestia raised the moon during Luna’s imprisonment, she could never replicate the subtle perfection that Luna fashioned from the moon and stars. Luna always made the night sky shimmer and sparkle in a way no one else could copy. Celestia was infinitely proud of her day, but she equally admired Luna’s night.

Conversely, her younger sister never could handle the sun. She could raise it easily enough, at first, but she could never get the arc right. It would always move halfway across the sky before steering off course. Luna would become exceedingly frustrated, and therefore quite adorable. They soon both learned to keep their day jobs, as it were. Which, Celestia felt, was as it should be.

She quickly prepared to teleport to the lounge where the girls spent most of their time. If she wasn’t in a hurry she would have preferred to walk. Teleportation was not a spell she particularly enjoyed casting. It was tiresome and required an enormous amount of concentration. Celestia could only think of a few unicorns that had the power necessary to attempt it, and even fewer who had

mastered it completely. Her horn began to glow brighter and brighter until, in a flash of light, the sun princess disappeared completely.

She reappeared with a sonic pop in the dark lounge. Her eyes took a moment to adjust. At first she thought the room was empty. She scanned the dark corners and her eyes eventually spied a long, luxurious pink tail. She followed the soft pink strands to find it was attached to the rear of Twilight Sparkle's friend Fluttershy. "*The element of kindness*," Celestia reminded herself. The upper half of the yellow pegasus, however, was obscured by a large plush red cushion she dove under for cover. The poor thing was shaking like a leaf. Celestia forgot how easily this one scared, and she felt awful for having frightened the little pegasus, but some part of her couldn't help but be amused by Fluttershy's rather adorable attempt at hiding.

A wicked thought crept, unbidden, into Celestia's head. She grinned devilishly. She simply couldn't resist the opportunity. She crawled toward the opposite side of the cushion as stealthily as possible. She lowered herself to the ground and snaked her head under the cushion. She soon beheld the sight of a terrified Fluttershy, her own butter yellow hooves wrapped around her head, eyes shut tight. Celestia held as still as possible for what seemed like ages, waiting for the pegasus to open her eyes. And soon the one aqua blue eye, which was not obscured by a lock of pink hair, slowly peeked open.

"Boo." Celestia whispered.

"EEEEEEEP!"

The small mare shot back in terror. She fled towards the door but she stopped when she heard the demure chuckling of princess Celestia. "...P...Princess?" She began, confused and out of breath.

"Oh, forgive me, my little pony. I just couldn't resist," Celestia answered, still laughing.

"Oh...um...It's ok, Princess. I just wasn't really expecting anyone; I mean at least not until...Rarity came back with the others."



Celestia didn't understand anything after 'expecting' but she was fairly certain she caught the name Rarity.

"And where, exactly are Rarity and the others?"

"They, um, went shopping. They should be back any moment though."

"*At least some ponies are enjoying themselves,*" she thought. She considered sending out a few guards to collect them, but she decided it would be better to simply wait. She sat at a nearby table and motioned for Fluttershy to join her. She heated a small pot of tea with a quick spell. She poured both herself and Fluttershy a cup.

"Um....Princess? If you don't mind me asking. Is everything alright?"

Celestia smiled at the shy young mare. "Well, I would say that everything is as alright as it can be, given the circumstances."

Fluttershy smiled back. "Oh...good. I think."

Right at that moment the door to the lounge pushed open and several familiar voices could be heard squabbling about something.

"I don't see why using what I was born with is unfair. They're my wings, and I think I should be allowed to use them!"

"Just cuz you were born with wings don't mean you get ta use em' to an unfair advantage."

"How is it *unfair*?! Your legs are stronger than mine, So would it be fair if I said you had to wear saddlebags full of sand?"

"No! That's the point of a race. Tah see who is more physically capable of reachin' the finish line first. *Without* any unfair advantages, like extra limbs."

"Well without my wings, YOU have the *unfair advantage*."

Applejack and Rainbow Dash continued their argument, oblivious to the princess' presence. They entered the room and began setting

the shopping bags down from their shoulders. Twilight and Rarity soon followed through the door. Twilight immediately lit up with excitement and concern when she noticed Celestia.

“Princess!” Twilight dumped her own shopping bags and trotted up to the table before remembering her manners and slipping into a quick bow. AJ and Rainbow Dash had ceased their bickering and hurriedly scrambled to bow as well.

As per usual, they fired off questions at an incomprehensible speed. Celestia patiently waited for a moment, but when they showed no sign of slowing she held up a hoof. A second later they all had piped down. Celestia began to slowly explain the situation.

“Yes, I did speak with him,” she started, “and for the most part he refused to answer any questions directly. I’m not entirely sure why he is being so circuitous, but he seems very adamant about sharing as little information with us as necessary. We have our own speculation as to why, but without his confirmation we can not be certain. We did learn one thing, however. It may be our greatest insight into his behavior. He is *not* an extra terrestrial. He did not, in fact come from another planet.” She let the revelation sink in.

“So, wait. Where is he from? He certainly isn’t from Equestia,” Rarity queried.

“No.” Celestia confirmed, “He is not from this planet. Nor is he from any other planet in this universe. Apparently he is from another universal stream entirely.”

“So howd’ he end up here?” AJ inquired.

“You don’t mean... lifestreams?” Twilight asked in a whisper.

Celestia smiled. There was a reason she had chosen to personally tutor Twilight. Her ability to grasp amazingly complicated concepts never ceased to amaze the sun princess. “Very good, Twilight Sparkle.” The small purple mare blushed. “Yes. We believe that he somehow skipped his from own and landed in ours.”

“But, Princess. I thought that was impossible. I mean, weren’t all

attempts transit a stream abandoned thousands of years ago?”

“Alright. I’m sorry, but does anypony want to *PLEASE* talk normal?” Rainbow Dash whined. The other girls agreed with her. Twilight and the Princess may as well have been speaking another language.

“I’m sorry, girls. Twilight? Would you like to explain?” Celestia offered.

Twilight nodded, eager to share her frightening knowledge of every aspect of everything ever anything-ed by anypony anywhere.

She began with a brief history of ponies first discovering magic, and how unicorn ponies seemed to be the most adept at channeling it’s power. “...eventually a very powerful unicorn by the name of Arcturus was experimenting with some very potent teleportation magic. Until he discovered it, teleportation was barely more than an unexplored hypothesis. He theorized that one would be able to cast a spell that would allow near instantaneous travel from one point to another. As it turns out, he was right. He was the first unicorn to successfully cast the teleportation spell. It was a rather crude version of what we practice today, but it proved his theory was sound, nonetheless.”

Rainbow Dash’s eyes had already begun to droop. She wasn’t interested in a history lesson. Applejack was at least *trying* to be polite about her boredom. She kept an interested face, but her eyes had glazed over, and she became lost in her own daydreams. But Twilight continued, unfazed.

“...As he became more and more proficient at these teleportation spells, he noticed that as the distance increased, the inherent accuracy of the spell decreased. Several unicorns began to injure themselves when they attempted the spell, often because they failed to estimate for the change in elevation from point A to point B. They would accidentally appear at their destination, ten feet off the ground, or worse...*under it*.”

Rarity shuddered at the thought of being surrounded by filthy dirt.

“...so Arcturus attempted to set a magical waypoint to the desired

destination, so that the need for rough guesstimates about relative changes in geography would be much easier to factor.” Twilight had to stop and take in another deep breath before continuing. “While he was unable to make his magical map, he discovered something else entirely. His spell revealed what he described as ‘the golden threads of the world.’ Apparently he had inadvertently revealed the lines of the universe, the very *foundation* of the cosmos. He called these lines, ‘lifestreams.’ These lines all combine to form what was to come to known as the ‘Empyrean Web,’ or the lines of the universe.” Twilight’s tone became more excited. “I have only ever seen them once, myself. So it’s rather difficult to describe, but imagine golden lines *everywhere*. They are completely invisible and intangible, normally. They can only be seen using the same spell he created thousands of years ago. They pass through solid objects unfazed, like a beam of light would pass through glass.” Twilight began to demonstrate by pointing all over the room with her hooves and connecting invisible threads to opposite sides of the lounge, looking about as if she could see them all before her. “But that wasn’t the only thing he discovered.”

“*Of course it’s not.*” Rainbow Dash plopped herself down on the ground, pulling at her eyelids with her cyan hooves in misery.

Twilight shot her a venomous glance, and continued. “As he fine-tuned his spell he found that some lines faded, and some new ones appeared. Eventually he plotted all these lines and found that throughout the range of his spell, only one remained constant. He believed this to be *our* line, the line that represented *our* universe. This in no small way created a lot of controversy, as it implied that each other line represented a different universe. No pony really wanted to believe that realities other than this one existed, and the theory was roundly dismissed by most scholars and magicians. But as time went on, evidence began to pile in his favor. And thus began the frantic attempt to ‘jump’ into another universe. Needless to say, No pony had ever been able to accomplish the feat. Not even Arcturus himself. After such mass speculation and disappointment, the lifestreams faded in the minds of pony kind to little more than a natural curiosity.”

“What the princess is suggesting,” she paused for dramatic effect,

“is that that thing’s species must have somehow found a way to detach themselves from their stream, and somehow ‘jump’ to ours.”

“I didn’t think it was physically possible,” Rainbow began.

“I know that’s why it’s so excit-“

“No.” She interrupted. “I meant I didn’t think it was possible for me to be MORE confused then I was twenty minutes ago. But you did it. Amazing.” The colorful pegasus massaged her head with her front hooves.

“Ah hate ta agree with Dash, but I still don’t see how any of this explains *why* he’s here, or why he’s been so desperate ta...well... ‘leave’.”

Celestia finally spoke up. “From what we gleaned from his incoherent ranting, we think that he believes his presence here is going to cause an apocalyptic tear in the fabric of reality. He seems to think that his arrival and continued interference in our universe will disrupt our *timeline* or something of that sort. We never really expected a genus as advanced as his to have such an outdated notion of time, but it does make some sense of his rather...desperate...actions thus far.”

“Yeah? Well I still don’t trust him.” Rainbow declared hotly. “In fact, I say we aughta’ let that big dummy sit there in that dungeon for a few more days and think about all the damage he’s done. I might even go teach his sorry flank a lesson.”

Celestia turned and caught the polychromatic pegasus in a brutal stare. “Miss Dash,” Celestia stated in a tone eerily reminiscent of a mother scolding a young foal, “do you know *why* he attempted to take his own life?” The room was dangerously quiet. Dash didn’t answer but cringed under Celestia gaze. “He did it because he was afraid of damaging this world. That *alien*, who has no stake in this dimension, was willing to die to keep you safe. That is more than I can even say for most of my own subjects. You would do well to remember that.”

“...Sorry princess,” Rainbow Dash apologized quietly.

Celestia relented. "It's alright. I understand your anger. You are merely concerned for the safety of your friends. But please refrain from letting such narrow vision shape your attitudes in the future."

The room was quiet for a moment because none were ready to speak. Soft moonlight spilled through the few windows. Luna would return to the cell momentarily, if she hadn't arrived already.

"Excuse me girls, I must return to the dungeons. Luna and I are going to try and speak to it again."

"Can we come this time princess?!" Twilight brought the full force of her puppy dog face to bare. "Pleeeeeaaaasee?"

Celestia saw that each of the six mares were looking up at her imploringly. She felt her heartstrings tug, but she was immune to such tactics after having her baby sister try them for centuries.

"I'm sorry girls. Not tonight. Perhaps tomorrow. Now is not a good time."

"But whyyyy? You said yourself that he didn't mean any harm." Twilight protested.

Celestia sighed. "Yes, I did. And I believe that. But...I'm afraid our new friend may not be ready for introductions right now." She paused for a moment. "You see, he has just learned that he is the sole surviving member of his species. And I do not believe he will feel much like talking."

The mood chilled. A dull pop could be heard from the other side of the large oak doors that led to the lounge. A split second later, they were thrown open with a surprising amount of force.

There in the doorway, stood Luna, breathing heavily.

"Celestia!"

"Luna? What going on? Are you alright?" Celestia shot to her hooves, alarmed at her sister's state and apparent alarm.

Luna stopped and caught her breath.

“We have a problem!”

# ARTICLE 2 Part V

## ARTICLE 2

### Part V

By: Muppetz (!Gsih3Wfnlk)

“Didn’t you try talking to him?!” Celestia queried as the two princesses trotted up the front steps of the large black monolith that served as the dungeon.

“I *did* try! But he seems to be having a bit of a breakdown and I don’t think he’s listening to me. I barely convinced Aegis not to sic the guards on him... At least not until we get back.”

“He didn’t get out, did he?” Celestia asked, dread coloring her tone.

Luna let out an exhausted sigh. “Not yet, no. But he’s certainly giving it his best attempt.”

Several sharp ringing noises echoed between the walls and intensified as they approached. They rounded a corner and found thirty guards stacked on both sides of the cell door, awaiting the order to enter. The soldier pony’s faces bore hardened resolve, but Celestia could easily see the fear in the guards’ eyes. They knew full well that at any moment they may have to charge in and subdue the intimidating creature. The furious din resounded from the cell; it sounded like a hammer smacking a steel anvil. Each strike was accompanied by a bright flash of white light, clearly visible through an open metal window in the door. The racket was muffled yet still loud enough to make Celestia’s ears hurt. Each crack rang out at intervals of a few seconds, pausing occasionally for a moment before resuming relentlessly.

The Commander spotted the two new arrivals and trotted over to them.

“What happened?” Celestia shouted over the noise.



The Commander shook his head. "We were doing what you told us. We were arranging for him to stay here tonight. At first he just sat there and watched us, but then... he just started...*laughing* like a madcolt, and started trying to break down that barrier." He shook his head again. "He's lost it, your highness. We tried to talk him down but..." He swung out his forelegs, defeated. "He wouldn't listen to Princess Luna, He won't listen to us. I would like permission to send in the guards and have him restrained before he hurts somepony."

"No! Don't send any more guards in. If you rush him he's just going to assume he's under attack and he could become violent again."

"*Become* violent? Princess, he's violent *now*!"

"I can talk him down. He's just scared. He's also probably in shock. Just open the door and I can get him back under control."

"Yeah, I can get him under control too...with some chains and a heavy sedative. Plus *MY* option doesn't involve tossing our Princesses in a cell with a rabid animal."

"He isn't an animal, Commander. Inside, he's just like you or me. He has hopes and fears, and he definitely isn't *rabid*."

Celestia walked over and peered through the small window. The alien was too preoccupied smashing a steel chair against the barrier to notice. Each blow sharply cracked with a bright flash. Celestia turned to Aegis with a slightly annoyed look. "Who gave him the chair?"

"It's a *chair*! I didn't think he'd try and use it as a weapon!" the Commander defended.

"I think, for future reference, we need to assume that anything we put in his hooves, he's going to try to use as a weapon. But I have to agree with Aegis, I didn't foresee the chair thing becoming a problem," Luna piped up.

Celestia rubbed the side of her head with a hoof, attempting he alleviate the inevitable headache growing behind her eyes. She took

a deep breath. "Alright, I'm going in."

The commander begrudgingly began to open the cell door as Celestia contemplated how best to console a distressed trans-dimensional being. No ideas came to mind.

Luna trotted up to Celestia's side and waited expectantly. Celestia looked down at her sister, amused. "Coming?"

"Indeed! This is a grand opportunity to study distress levels and possibly help us understand his emotional responses."

The door began its slow inward glide. The ringing paused. When the gap was big enough, Celestia slid inside, followed closely by Luna. The creature lowered his chair and took a look at the new arrivals. He had shed his camouflaged outer blouse in favor of the olive drab t-shirt beneath it. The shirt was dotted with bloodstains and its fabric was torn in several places, presumably from shattered glass. His eyes flicked from Celestia and Luna to the door. Luna followed his gaze and quickly moved to block the exit. The creature merely chuckled, shook his head, hefted the chair behind his head and swung it into the barrier.

Luna raised a wing to shield her eyes from the flare of light, but the steel pang still made her ears hurt.

"Shane," Celestia began tentatively. "Are you alright?"

He stopped in mid swing, lowered the chair and pointed a finger at Celestia. "I think I figured it out!" He said excitedly.

"That's *wonderful*. How about you set down the chair, and tell me exactly what it is you've figured out."

He let the chair fall. It landed with a thud against the padded floor. "Everything! This explains everything!" His lips curved into a desperate grin.

"Do share." Celestia said trying to maintain a calm tone.

He threw his arms out to either side. "I'm dead!" he stated as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I've been dead this

whole time! It all makes sense.”

“That makes...*no* sense... at all.” Luna corrected.

“It does! I’m dead... and *this* is hell.” He looked around the room distastefully.

Celestia tried not to take the analogy personally.

“Major Doran, you aren’t dead.”

“Nope. Dead. I’m in hell. God is pissed off because I stopped going to church... and also probably because of all of those... you know...*sins*,” he said, somewhat to himself. “...and now I’m in hell, and for some reason my punishment is to be eternally tormented by childhood fantasy creatures...you are all the manifestation of some repressed childhood memories that probably have everything to do with my mother.”

Luna raised her head toward Celestia and whispered in her ear, “I think Aegis was right, he may have lost it.”

“He’s in denial, he’ll snap out of it,” Celestia assured her. “You aren’t dead, Major. We spent a lot of time ensuring that.”

“I have to be.” He let out a sad, humorless chuckle. “There’s no other way it could be this fucked up.”

“I know this isn’t easy for you, but you can’t run from this. You are very much alive, and you know it. It might not be what you wanted, but this is how it turned out.” Shane stopped and stared into Celestia’s eyes, a pained look on his face. “I’m sorry, Shane. I truly am, but you were given a second chance. Fate, destiny, dumb luck, call it what you will-”

“No! I can’t be alive. This can’t be real!” His voice grew more and more desperate as he tried frantically to deny the truth.

“It *IS* real, Major Doran, accept it!”

“No No No No! I can’t let this happen!!” He began to pace, eyes wide in panic.

"It *HAS* happened. I know this is tough to swallow but this is real and *you know that*. We are running low on time, Major. I can not protect you forever. I may be sympathetic to your situation but trust me there are those of us that won't be. I can help you."

He gave no inclination of having paid any attention to what she was saying. He was pacing the perimeter of the cell, looking for any means of escape, frantically scouring the walls with his eyes. His pacing only seemed to heighten his anxiety. "I want out," he stated plainly. "I have to get out!" His tone shifted to desperate panic.

"Calm down, Shane. Listen to me, you can't."

"NO! I'm done! I wanna go home!" He bent down and picked up the chair. He reared it back and smashed it into the barrier in front of him.

"Shane! Stop!" Celestia commanded in an unnaturally loud voice. "You need to calm down!"

He ignored her and continued smashing the steel piece of furniture into the glowing wall. A razor thin crack sheared through the wall. Each additional blow spread it further. Shane saw this and began to beat into the wall with renewed vigor.

"Shane you can't just leave!"

"Watch me," he seethed. "I'm SICK of this SHIT! I. WANT. TO. GO . HOME!" He punctuated each word with a blow to the barrier, which was now spider webbed with cracks and pulsating violently.

With the barrier on the verge of collapse, Celestia spread her wings and readied herself. If force was all he could understand, so be it.

He raised the chair back one more time, intending to deliver the final strike...

"STOP!" A new voice echoed in the tiny room, a voice that rarely raised above a whisper. Celestia had to turn to see it for herself, to confirm the voice's owner. A small yellow pegasus stood in the doorway, eyes wide and wings spread.

Alarm sounded in Celestia's head. She was about to protest the little ponies presence. But Luna tapped Celestia on the side. Celestia looked to her little sister, who was busy watching the creature with a small smile on her face. Celestia followed her gaze to the alien.

His chair was stopped mid-swing and he stood frozen in place, staring intently at Fluttershy with a mixture of fascination and terror. Celestia flicked back and forth between Fluttershy and the alien. It took her a moment to realize what exactly was going on. She remembered Twilight Sparkle mentioning this strange phenomenon in a few of her letters. They called it *The Stare*. Brutal mental dominance was an odd talent for such a shy, innocent young girl; Celestia had never seen a power like it. This was the first time she witnessed its use first hoof.

Fluttershy focused, unblinking with a determination in her gaze dangerously out of character for the demure pegasus. "Put it down," she ordered. Celestia eagerly turned back to see if he would comply.

The muscles in his arms shook slightly, and his one eye twitched, but his fingers slowly uncurled from around the back of the chair and it fell to the floor with a soft thud.

"Good," Fluttershy continued, a satisfied flavor in her voice, "have a seat."

He didn't respond to this demand as easily. He continued to stand, muscles twitching. His head turned, trying desperately to break eye contact. But no matter which way he held his head he couldn't seem to sever her line of sight. He struggled, jaws clenched and sweat beading his forehead. Fluttershy noted his attempts to rebuff the effects of her stare. She stormed past the doorway, into the room and directly up to edge of the cracked, glowing wall. Her eyes nearly doubled in size as she bore the full brunt of her control upon him.

"*Sit*," she repeated.

This time he obeyed without hesitation, falling back onto his rear with his two legs spread out into a V in front of him. He was sweating profusely and the veins in his neck and arms stood in

relief against his skin.

Fascinated, Celestia and Luna watched the mental exchange, amazed at the ease with which the mouse had commanded the lion. Celestia was astonished. This creature had resisted some of the most complex and powerful magic known to ponydom, and here he was, brought to heel by the sheer willpower of a small pegasus.

“Good, boy,” Fluttershy praised. Celestia thought she saw the corners of his mouth lift ever so slightly into confused smile. Celestia let the pegasus control the alien for a few moments longer than she probably should have. She was grateful for the brief respite. It gave her the precious seconds she needed to collect her thoughts. She also hated to admit she felt a dark satisfaction from the sight. Aside from the delicious irony, she now had a definitive weapon to use against the thing should he choose to misbehave again. There was still the question of exactly *how* Fluttershy was able to get past the guards in the first place, but that could be addressed later.

Fluttershy hovered over the clearly petrified alien and exerted a level of dominance over the creature that caused Celestia to actually feel bad for him for a moment, and judging by the veins bulging in his neck and the random twitching of muscles, she needed to stop Fluttershy’s stare before she caused him permanent damage. Not that Fluttershy would ever intentionally bring harm to any living creature, but it was impossible to predict what manner of effect the stare could be having on its alien psyche.

“Luna,” she started.

“I’m on it,” her sister replied, anticipating the request. Luna stepped forward and her horn glowed softly. Fluttershy was wrapped in a shimmering blue cloud of magic and with an inaudible “eeep,” she was whisked out of the room. The Night Princess followed the floating pony and shut the door behind her, sealing Celestia inside. Celestia wasn’t concerned, if she so desired she could merely rip the door from its frame.

The moment Fluttershy was out of sight he sucked in air, filling his lungs as if he had been holding his breath the entire time. He

scooted away from the door as fast as his legs could push, until he hit the back wall of the room. He tried to push himself through the wall, all the while gasping for air. He rubbed at his eyes vigorously, attempting to scrub out Fluttershy's influence. Once his more violent convulsions ceased, he contented himself by hugging his legs close to his chest and resting his chin on his knees, and blinking excessively.

"Are you going to be alright?" Celestia started, slightly concerned.

He didn't respond. He merely focused on blinking and twitching his eyes.

"Shane?" she began again, taking a tentative step forward. He started, surprised, as if he forgot all about Celestia.

"I'm sorry about that, but you left me little choice." Celestia pretended the coincidence of Fluttershy's sudden arrival was intentional; sometimes maintaining the illusion of control was just as important as actually having it. If she could convince the beast that she had the ability to use Fluttershy against him at any moment she might be able to *discourage* any further misbehavior.

He finally spoke through gritted teeth, squeezing his head between his hands. "What the fuck did you do?! It... I couldn't...*think*."

"They call it *The Stare*."

He ran his hands through his short mane, a few times, before sucking in a large breath of air. "This *IS* real...isn't it?" he asked sadly, finally looking up to Celestia for an answer. He calmed down as the reality of his situation sank in.

Celestia felt a pang of genuine pity. For all the trouble he had caused her, given the sheer magnitude of his predicament, one could hardly expect him to accept it without conflict. "I'm afraid so." She answered, as sympathetically as she could.

He took a moment before speaking again, before he said tersely, "That sucks," as if the words summed up the entire situation.

"I'm sorry," was all she could think to say. She wondered where

Luna had wandered off to after disarming Fluttershy. It was not like her to miss out on a rare opportunity such as this.

“Why me?!” he posed, shaking his head, trying desperately to refute Celestia’s words. “Why should I have to live?! Why did they all get to die and I didn’t?!” Celestia didn’t have an answer. “If this is real it... how can it be? ...It doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Any of this,” he slashed a hand through the air. “How is it possible that I’m here? *This* shouldn’t be...*doable*.”

“You are referring to the fact that you are now occupying a new universe?”

“Yes. I mean... there are like... *rules*...rules which cannot be broken, ever. *Conservation of Matter* for example. ‘Matter can not be created or destroyed.’ Does that even *apply* in this place?” He gestured to the world in general.

Celestia nodded. “Of course.”

“And that rule is impossible to break, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Then how were we able to leave *our* universe? How did all that *stuff*; the ship, the equipment, ourselves, leave the closed system that is, *our* universe?”

“I fail to see how the rule has been broken in this scenario.”

He stared at her with a blank expression, disappointed that she had not caught on to his implication. “We removed matter from our universe.”

“So?”

“So we broke the rule.”

“The rule forbids destroying or creating matter. You did neither of



those things. You simply moved matter from one spot to another.”

“But we took it out of our universe.”

Celestia tried to think of a way to explain. “Think of it like two rivers. One river is ‘your’ universe, the other, is mine.” He was a bit perplexed by the sudden analogy, but waited patiently for her to continue. “If I were to pluck a pebble from the bed of your river, and toss it into my river, do you think that because I removed matter from one river and added it to another, realities will cease to exist?”

“But for this to be possible both ‘rivers’ would have to be a part of the same system. They would have to both need to be....like...”

“...smaller parts to a larger whole.” Celestia finished for him.

“Yes. But they aren’t. Our universe has closed boundaries that nothing enters or leaves.”

“For a species so advanced your vision is still quite narrow.”

“This has been our understanding for about two hundred thousand years. *Excuse me Princess* if I’m having a little trouble letting go!” he replied hotly.

Celestia noted the number with interest, adding the age of his species to the very tiny library of information she had on the creature. “Try not to think of it in terms of boundaries and limits, but try instead thinking in terms of ‘what is’ and ‘what is not.’” His only response was a blank, slightly annoyed, stare. “Widen your stance, expand your vision. Existence does not end within the confines of any one reality. Your transition was but a drop in an infinite ocean. You have not *left* in the traditional sense, merely relocated yourselves. Nothing you, or anypony else, can do will ever halt the inexorable flow of time. Yes, your presence here has and will continue to change the flow and direction of this ‘river’ but you will never stop it.”

“How can you know this? How can anyone *know* that?”

“I know it, because I am connected to this world in ways no others

are. I can not explain it more than that. You will have to accept that on faith.” He sarcastically snorted. As if *faith* was the last thing he would be giving to Celestia. She continued anyway. “*You* know it, because you are here speaking to me now. You are the living proof that negates the structure you so desperately cling to. Why do you deny the truth when it presents itself?”

“I don’t know,” He rubbed his face with his hands in a tired fashion, “I’m not an astrophysicist.”

“What are you?”

He looked up at her, wearing an amused smile, as if it had become a game to see how long it would take her to finally ask. “I’m a lot of things.”

“Are you any one thing more than the others?”

“Yes, but given our current standing I’ll assume you aren’t interested some of the more subtle formalities of my person.” Celestia was amused by his sudden shift to eloquence but allowed him to continue without comment. “What do you want to know?”

“How about your species.”

“Human. ‘*Homo Sapiens Sapiens*’ if you wanna get fancy.”

“Where are you from?”

“Personally? Kentucky. But that probably doesn’t mean much to you, so suffice to say I’m from a little blue planet not all that different from this one.”

“How did you end up here?”

“Mostly, I don’t know. What I do know is classified.”

Celestia was scarcely satisfied with the answer, “I think this is hardly the time for secrets, Major Doran. We deserve to know what exactly we are dealing with.”

“I agree. But I still can’t reveal mission critical information to a

foreign government.”

“I’m just trying to do what is best for both of us.”

“What was ‘*best*’ would have been letting me die with my men and ending it there,” he retorted bitterly.

“Shane ...I’m sorry for your losses, I truly am. And believe me this is not how I wanted this to go. But we did the best we could with the time we were given, and we will do our best to help you, but we need your cooperation here. You need to *let us* help you. We are not your enemies.”

He looked up at Celestia suspiciously, attempting to figure what she was all about. “Alright, what do you want?”

Celestia was slightly taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“No one just *wants to help*. What do you want out of this? You’re going to offer to help get me home, and then *conveniently* make a few demands, yes? So what do you want? Weapons? Tech? I imagine you’ve already seized the ship and all my shit. So what else do you want from me?”

The direction he was taking the conversation was disturbing Celestia. He had severe trust issues, and whether that was due to his nature as a species or it was an acquired behavior was impossible to tell. It seemed that the more she spoke to him, the more questions she accrued. “Why is that so difficult for you to believe?”

He didn’t have an answer; in fact, Celestia’s challenge seemed to have stopped him in his tracks, confusing him on a primal level. Celestia noticed his confusion and took note of it with interest.

Rather than answer Celestia, he stood up and went over to a cot that one of the guards brought in before his outburst. The cot was too small for him, but it was the best they could find on such short notice. He picked up the cluster of silver necklaces that rested on top of the green canvass. Shane stared at the collection of silver tags, with defeated look in his eyes. “I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t even be alive.” He paused and withdrew slightly. “You know what

the fucked up, ironic truth is?" It was obviously a rhetorical question, so Celestia waited silently for him to continue. "It was *my* job to keep *them* safe."

"You feel guilty for having survived?" She had anticipated this as a possibility. Although, before today, she wasn't even sure he experienced emotions the way ponies did. A subtle nod was his only reply. "Was this incident caused by some fault of yours?" Celestia was trying to be gentle with her words, but she needed to know.

He locked her bright pink eyes with his marble blue ones. "No."

"Then know that there was nothing you could have done. No pony could have expected to survive that, it is foolish to think otherwise. I doubt the knowledge will bring you any happiness, but if what you say is true then I hope you understand that this outcome was unavoidable. It was a tragic accident, but it was an accident you could do nothing to prevent." He put on the same expressionless mask she knew concealed any emotion he might be feeling. "Mourn their loss, honor their memories, but do not fault yourself for their deaths. It is a terrible trap to fall into, one that all too often ensnares those burdened with the sorrows of survival."

He was quiet for a small span as he studied Celestia, once again reforming his concept of the Princess. "Who did you lose?"

After a brief instant of surprise Celestia gave him a sad smile. She wondered if she had really been so obvious with her speech, or if this creature was also painfully familiar with the heartaches of loss. "I've had the misfortune of outliving many friends." Her voice remained calm, but she felt sad nostalgia. Yet she resisted the urge to reminisce on things lost. She found long ago that living the past was a terrible habit to fall into, one not easily broken.

"Sucks, doesn't it?" he remarked eloquently.

"Yes," Celestia answered quietly, doing her best to keep emotion from her speech.

"I'm sorry." He said, surprising Celestia slightly. "For what its worth." Sympathy was a new trick for him.

“The curse of longevity, I’m afraid,” she said, smiling sadly. After a moment’s indecision, his own lips cracked into a small shadow of a smile.

She could tell he yearned to press her for an explanation but, to his credit, he held his tongue. Celestia was happy to have finally established a dialogue with the creature. Even if the topic was rather grim, at least she had her hoof in the door, metaphorically speaking.

Although now that she was openly conversing, she found she couldn’t really think of anything to say. And so the silence grew. He didn’t seem to mind the quiet. He was obviously lost in his own thoughts.

“What happens now?” He finally elected to breach the stillness.

Celestia took a deep breath before answering. “Well, that depends a great deal upon you.”

“I hate to disagree with you, but I don’t seem to be in the best of bargaining positions to begin calling shots. As far as I’m concerned, it’s your move, *Princess*.”

“And therein, lies our problem,” she began to slowly pace back and forth along the barrier’s cracked surface. His head swiveled on his shoulders, following her movements with practiced precision. “I’m afraid I can’t ‘*make a move*’ without knowing for certain that you are, in no way, a threat to any of my subjects.”

“And you think that I am,” he said, in what Celestia would have sworn was pleased tone.

Celestia chose her words with care, “I do not believe that is your intent. However, you must understand that your mere presence here, if not managed delicately, could prove disastrous. Ideally, I would like to move you out of the dungeon and placed under our protective care.”

“Implying I’m the one that needs protecting.” he said with an amused grin. “You seem to be placing an unusual amount of faith in

my continued...pacific...attitude. How do you know you can trust me on my word alone?"

"Can't I?" she posed with a wry smile.

"Fraid' I can't answer that for you. Whom you decide to trust is a choice for you alone to make."

"But that choice will affect us both."

"True, but at the end of the day, you're the one with the guards and the guns, which means you call the shots."

"We can work together to try and get you home, Major. I would like to help you, but you're going to have to meet me half way. This is not my decision alone. This is a bridge we both must cross. Your commitment to duty is admirable, but you must understand that, as the only surviving member of your species, the responsibility of action falls to you."

He was silent for a long moment. Celestia soon feared he wasn't going to answer. But he relented and said, "Alright, Princess. This is what I can do." He mustered as diplomatic a voice as he could. "In hopes of furthering mutually beneficial goals, I will hereby temporarily cease all unprovoked hostile actions on behalf of myself, and these United States Marine Corps, with the Sovereign State of..."

*"Equestria."*

"...Equestria, until an official agreement can be reached on an armistice."

"Wonderful." Celestia beamed. She neglected to point out that they were never technically at war, and that he was technically more of a refugee than a foreign diplomat. But it was an enormous leap in progress. "And you will agree to be placed under our protective care?" She wondered if she was pressing her luck.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really."

“Then I guess I do,” he deadpanned, his face looking like he’d bitten something unpleasant.

Celestia’s smile widened. It was less than she hoped for, but more than she expected. She was however disappointed Luna had missed out on the historic moment.

“So...Seeing as we’ve reached the political equivalent of ‘*I’ll stop if you stop*’ what happens now?” He asked, sounding very cynical about the arrangement.

“Now, it is very late. I have matters that must be attended to. Rest, Major Doran. You have had a busy day, and tomorrow will certainly be busier still. We shall do our best to accommodate your needs. I will leave you in peace for a few hours. Try and sleep, if you can.” Celestia turned toward the door. She tapped on it with her forehoof, and the mechanisms that held it shut audibly moved out of place as it was opened from the outside. She looked back over her shoulder. “Oh... and, Shane?”

He lifted his head to meet her gaze but didn’t respond.

Celestia reached back with her rear leg and tapped the barrier with her golden shod hoof. With that final hit, the cracks in the transparent wall finally won over and the wall shattered in a brilliant display of golden sparks, which fell to the floor and dissipated seemingly into thin air. “Welcome to Equestria.”

~

# ARTICLE 2 Part VI

## ARTICLE 2

### Part VI

By: Muppetz (!Gsih3Wfnlk)

~~~~~

Fluttershy gave a small squeak as Luna's magic lifted her of the ground. The little pegasus was swiftly swept through the door and out the cell. The dungeon corridor was lit only by the occasional torch on the wall. Luna had long since raised the moon, the light from which now cast slender beams of cool silver light onto the floor through small openings high on the outer wall. It took her eyes only a fraction of a second to adjust to the dark, and she soon spotted the guard commander. Luna's temper flared slightly when she saw he was standing next to Twilight Sparkle along with another three of the elements of harmony.

Luna quickly turned and shut the door behind her, no longer able to risk the creature getting out of his cell. She looked expectantly at the commander before setting Fluttershy down in front of him implicatively. "Forgive me if I am mistaken, Commander. But I could have sworn you were ordered to allow no one into this building. Was I unclear in my direction?" "Your instructions were beyond question, your majesty. The Elements are here by my request." He responded, as he stood to his full height, steeling himself in preparation for the princess' wrath.

"I do hope you have a good justification for disobeying your *one* order."

"I went to fetch the Element of Kindness when it became obvious her majesties were unable to reason with the creature. I *have* read the dossiers on the Elements of Harmony, and I thought Miss Fluttershy's experience with wild animals would enable her to



possibly advise us on a more pertinent course of action. The other girls refused to allow Fluttershy to come alone, and without time to argue I brought the lot of them. I take full responsibility, your highness."

Fluttershy stepped forward and faced the taller blue alicorn. "Your Highness, it's not his-" Aegis quickly turned and shot Fluttershy a hard stare, with a clear '*stop talking*' overtone. Fluttershy ducked into her own mane. Uncomfortable with the fact the Commander was taking the entire blame for her. It was true he came to her for advice, but what he neglected to tell the princess, was that it was she who had insisted on needing to be there to actually help. With the other girls backing her up, the Commander had little choice other than to allow them to come along.

"My actions were my own, Majesty," he reiterated.

Luna considered him for a moment. He didn't shirk her gaze. He stood fast, awaiting his punishment. "I see. Well, Commander, I suppose thanks are in order." She finally said.

His puzzlement was blatantly obvious. "High... Highness?"

"I am not *happy* that you defied my orders, but I did not appoint you to this position so that you could mindlessly agree with me. You made a quick decision and it saved us a bit of trouble."

He blinked a few times, realizing he, in fact, was *not* about to be chewed out. "Th... Thank you, Princess."

"Don't let it happen again." Luna shifted her attention to Fluttershy, who was still standing between them shuffling her hooves awkwardly. "Are you alright?"

"Oh...yes, your Highness. I'm fine," she nodded quickly, "but... um...if you don't mind, Princess, I was wondering, if it's ok with you, if maybe I could go back in and take a look at him? He seemed to be awfully hurt, and if you don't get something on those cuts they might get infected." Fluttershy began to shift around Luna who blocked her path with a long blue wing.

"I appreciate your desire to help, my dear, but it seems Celestia was right. Until he agrees to calm down I don't want any of you near this cell."

Fluttershy hated it. There was an animal in pain not ten yards away, yet there was nothing she could do to help. It seemed profoundly wrong. He didn't seem dangerous to her, he was just hurt and scared and probably needed a hug. However Fluttershy didn't dare disagree with Luna. She merely ducked her head and backpedalled until she was safely behind Applejack, who gave her a comforting nuzzle.

Luna continued to converse with the Commander about further containment of the creature, Twilight offered her input as well, along with the occasional hotheaded remark from Rainbow Dash. The conversation ranged from control issues, to public concealment, to its strange reactions to magic. Fluttershy was mostly content to sit behind Applejack, who provided a modicum of concealment from all the scary looking soldier ponies.

All conversations halted suddenly when a few knocks were heard coming from the cell door.

"Open it!" Aegis ordered, as several ranks of guards formed around the door. Two guards hurried to undo the various locks and enchantments that held it shut.

The heavy door slid inward and Celestia strutted out looking highly pleased with herself. That is until she noticed the cluster of fillies. Her smirk faded and she inspected the group with a tired look.

"Will somepony please explain to me *why* the girls are squarely in the *one* building I forbade them from going near?" For the next few minutes Luna quickly summarized the situation to her sister, herself, downplaying a few of the more incriminating aspects. "So how did it go *in there*? How did he react to the stare? Did he recover?"

"Yes, he's fine." She waved a hoof dismissively. "I think we're actually beginning to make some progress with him. He even answered some of my questions!" She was a bit too excited at the

accomplishment.

“You got him talking,” Luna said, disbelieving, “and I missed it?! What did he say?”

“Not much,” she admitted. “He still doesn’t seem very keen on conversation, not that I can really blame him. He’s had a rough day.”

“Did he tell you anything useful?”

“A bit. They call themselves, ‘*Human*’.” Luna trotted toward the door. “Ooh I have so many questions to ask him!” She pranced slightly when she reached the cell door and began magically undoing locks.

Celestia stepped forward and placed a hoof on Luna’s shoulder. “Not now, Luna.”

Luna’s eyes shot back and forth between Celestia and the door. “But... but... He’s finally talking! There’s so much we can learn.” She objected fervently.

“*And* he will be there in the morning. It’s already late. I promised we’d leave him alone for the night.”

Luna slid back the rectangular slide on the door and peered inside. He was sitting on the cot, holding the sleeve of his camouflaged blouse against the split skin on his forehead. “See? Wide awake. He doesn’t even look tired. In fact, he looks like he could really use somepony to talk to.”

“No, Luna. I’m still not sure he’s entirely stable. He’s promised to behave, but I’m not foolish enough to trust him on his word alone.”

“I can *hear* you!” he shouted from inside the cell. Celestia blushed slightly and slid the tiny window closed.

Rainbow Dash landed right next to the cell with a small thud. “Was that him?! Is that what he sounds like? Will we get to see him, Princess?”

“Yes, yes, yes. Everypony will get to meet him, just... *not* tonight,” she assured. “He has a lot to reconcile with.” The girls all still let out a disappointed 'aw', and Luna's disappointment showed plainly across her face.

“Come on now. It's late. The Human will keep overnight. Everyone go get some sleep. I'll make introductions tomorrow.” She said, sounding extremely maternal.

The girls hung their heads in discontent but slowly marched down the hall toward the door that led to the courtyard. They passed several sets of armored guards on patrol, their steel shod hooves echoed off the stone walls. The sound was hypnotic, as they each took their steps in perfect unison. It was a rhythmic pattern that reminded Fluttershy very much of being inside a giant clock. Although she would have much preferred the peace and quiet of her cottage.

The girls all spilled out onto the courtyard outside the large black monolith that was the dungeon. The building seemed dangerously out of place amongst the chiefly white and gold castle. The entire structure had an eerie presence about it. Tall and imposing, it seemed to relish in the dark of the night, as if blackness were its natural color; Fluttershy was eager to leave its presence.

Rainbow Dash immediately shot off the ground and into the night sky. She had often waxed on about the differences in day and night flight. Dash insisted that night air always cut cleaner than the warmer day air. As Fluttershy was the only other pegasus of the group, she often caught the brunt of Rainbow's rambling. She didn't mind though, she was always happy to listen.

Rainbow kept circling the group, executing a few flips or twists, but always remaining close enough to participate on the conversation.

They began the walk across the darkened castle grounds, following the flameless lanterns set up strategically throughout the castle. It was enough light for them to make out their path but not enough that it overpowered Luna's stars. A problem one encountered in the city side of Canterlot.

Applejack was the first to break the silence. “So did ya get ta see it up close, Shy?”

“Oh.. um.. yes.” She started, sounding very unsure of herself.

Rainbow Dash alighted along the group, “You *know* she did. Fluttershy put that thing in his place!”

Fluttershy blushed, uncomfortable with Rainbow’s attempted praise. She didn’t feel good about what she had done. He was just afraid. She didn’t *want* to use the stare on him, but he was almost through that wall. Without any time to spare it sort of just happened. She also hadn’t expected it to be quite so potent, animals rarely gave her any trouble, and the few times she was actually forced to use The Stare were never that effective. She couldn’t get the image of his terror stricken face out of her head. It was all she could do not to go back and apologize, but she knew she wouldn’t be allowed near him again.

She had no choice but to wait for the morning. Before long the girls had climbed the stairs to their rooms, near the lounge that they had made their unofficial headquarters. Fluttershy’s room was located directly next to Rarity, and across the hall from Rainbow Dash. She noticed Pinkie Pie’s door was already shut. No light came from the small crack under the door. “*It is pretty late. She must have already gone to bed,*” she thought, the prospect appealing to Fluttershy, whose own eyelids were beginning to feel heavy. She closed the door behind her and curled up on the lush four poster bed. It was a bit extravagant decorum for Fluttershy’s taste, but very soft and warm. She closed her eyelids, the afterimage of two frightened blue eyes staring back at her the last thing she thought of before drifting off to sleep.

~~~~~

“*No! It has to be PERFECT.*” Pinkie Pie threw out another batch of batter. It was creamy and smooth and butter yellow, but she had used just a touch too much flour, throwing off her master recipe. It had to be followed to the letter, no deviation was allowed from the correct path. This was arguably one of the most crucial confectionary comestibles her culinary capabilities had ever crafted.

Her eyelids were drooping; she had been running on sugar and willpower for almost two days. She couldn't quit now, she was so close!

The palace kitchens were very impressive. Everything was new and shiny. Well...everything *WAS* new and shiny, before Pinkie settled in. Now most of the kitchen's surfaces were covered in flour or batter.

She didn't have time to worry about that now. She set a clean bowl on the countertop and began to measure out appropriate amounts of flour, baking soda, and sugar. She struggled to suppress a yawn, as she reached down and picked up a kitchen knife, the handle firmly in her teeth. She scraped the blunt edge of the blade across the top of the measuring cup, shaving off a bit of flour and ensuring it was indeed one perfect cup. She dumped the contents of the cup into a bowl and repeated the meticulous process for the appropriate amounts of sugar, baking soda, milk, and salt. She even bothered to get out a ruler and scale for the butter.

Her eyelids began to droop as she reached for an egg. She picked up the delicate oval in her teeth and gently cracked it into the bowl, careful not to include any bits of shell.

Her eyes fell shut for a moment. "*No!*" She quickly jerked herself awake. "*Can't sleep yet.*" She suppressed another yawn and picked up the eggbeater and slid the sliver ends of the device into the mixture. She flicked the switch... nothing. She toggled it back and forth a few more times, but the device remained silent. She stifled yet another deep yawn. She lazily followed the cord from the device to the wall. The plug had come out of the outlet. She picked up the rubber cord in her teeth and pushed it back into the socket. The device sprung to life, the two submerged beaters began to twirl, making the entire device jump around wildly. The rouge machine was sending little globs of batter everywhere, splattering the already filthy kitchen.

Jerked out of her sleepy daze, Pinkie Pie quickly turned and yanked the cord from the wall. The machine fell quiet with a small sputter. She chuckled slightly, as she wiped a blob of batter off her face. She made her way over to the bowl and pulled the whisks from the

bowl. Disappointed she would have to, yet again, start ov- “*WAIT!*”

She examined the mixture up close once more. The batter clung to the whisks ever so lightly. It was fluffy and smooth and not a single lump could be seen. It was...

“*Perfect,*” Pinkie Pie completed her thoughts in a whisper of reverence.

This was it. This was what she needed! She continued to admire the mixture. Without wasting another moment she pranced over and grabbed a cupcake pan, placing a small paper cup in each of the metal pockets. She poured a predetermined amount into each of the depressions and placed them in the preheated oven.

Her weariness erased, she diligently watched the cupcakes through the tiny reinforced glass on the oven door, occasionally stealing a look at the countdown timer. She watched to clock slowly tick away the seconds. One by one they flitted by. Before long they would be ready, each tick bringing her closer. \

She walked over to a window in the far wall. Out into the night she looked. The top of the onyx black building could be seen, only visible because of the small square of stars it blocked from the horizon. “*Soon.*”

~~~~~

Luna unfurled her long azure wings, stretching every feather. She arched her back like a cat. Not a particularly refined move, but the only ponies around were Aegis and her sister. She doubted they would mind.

“I still don’t like it,” the Commander began. “I think it’s too dangerous, to let loose.”

“Who said we’re setting *him* loose? Either Luna or I will always be there to keep an eye on him. Besides you’re being far too suspicious. I do not believe he wishes to harm anyone.” Celestia assured.

“I have six guards in the infirmary that would disagree.” He retorted.

“Yes, and he put them there believing that doing so would save the entirety of civilization. He was trying to keep us *safe*, and he was willing to die to do it.” She countered.

“It just doesn’t *feel* right.” He protested.

“If he wanted blood he would have taken it.” Luna chimed in. “He’s had plenty of opportunities. The nurse, Twilight Sparkle, countless guards, he could have easily killed all of them, yet he chose not to. These are not the actions of one who wishes for violence.”

“It could be a trick.” He said stubbornly. Luna let out a laugh that had no indications of actual humor.

“If he actually staged the crash, allowed ten of his kind to die, spent six days in a coma, spared the lives of our subjects, and feigned a suicide attempt, ALL just to set us up for a trap, then I say let him. He deserves it.”

With Luna’s point well made, Aegis sat in silence, unable to think up any more arguments.

“I understand your concern, Commander,” Celestia began, “You are correct in believing this is a dangerous creature, of that I have no doubt, he clearly has a talent for violence. But these are not reasons to keep him confined. He is not an animal, and continuing to keep him imprisoned based solely on the fact that he has the *potential* to harm somepony is cruel and barbaric. Everypony has the freedom to choose. So far he has chosen to protect us at his own expense. I have no reason to suspect that would change. There’s no reason we can’t be civil.”

Aegis sat in silence, an irritable frown upon his face. He tried to think of a time in which he actually won an argument against the two alicorns. None came to mind.

“Besides,” Luna spoke up with a grin, “he wouldn’t dare attempt any hostility with you here to protect us.” She moved in to nuzzle the Commander affectionately. Aegis quickly stiff-armed the night princess, who adopted a wounded countenance and trotted away before shuffling her wings and curling up on a large red dais.



Celestia chuckled lightly at her baby sisters antics.

Luna could tell Aegis was suppressing a smile. She knew he would never let one show out of turn. He was too well disciplined. Luna almost regretted appointing him as commander of the Royal Guard. The position seemed to drain a good portion of the frivolity he used to display. Unfortunately, he was very good at what he did, which made him a front runner for the position.

Alas, they all had their prices to pay. Such responsibility tended to turn a pony hard, that stoic nature that seemed prevalent among those accountable for the lives of others. She was grateful that his coldness had not yet turned to resentment or apathy, as it almost always did with ponies that have seen too much.

Celestia shuffled her wings and repositioned herself on the cushion. "You should get some rest, Commander."

"I'm fine," he argued. "I have to get back to the barracks. The large number of guards protecting the dungeon has left a significant dent in our city patrols. I need to reorganize the night watch, and set a new schedule for rounds." He rubbed his temple with a hoof as he continued to recite a list of tasks that needed his attention.

"All of this can be delegated. You have competent officers, Commander. I suggest you make use of them lest they feel neglected. *You* need to sleep, overexerting yourself helps nopony, and we'll certainly need you at your best tomorrow."

"There's just too much that needs doing."

"Must I really *order* you to rest?"

"Yes." He countered stubbornly.

"Very well. Guard Commander, Aegis. By royal decree, you are hereby commanded by the Princess of Equestria, to go to sleep." Celestia proclaimed with her natural air of authority.

Luna chimed, "Yeah, go to sleep. Also, take a vacation sometime, meet a nice mare, settle down, and have a foal before you get too old." Luna swirled a hoof in the air as she dictated the Commander

his future. "I mean let's face it you're not a colt anymore." She smiled and lolled about on her dais.

After a moment of stoic impassivity on the Commander's part, he eventually cracked a smile and even chuckled a bit. They shared a collective laugh, letting out a good deal of the tension the day had brought.

The Commander eventually stood, "It appears I have quite a bit of work ahead of me then. I'm going to have to go practice my small talk. I'm terrible at flirting." He swung a foreleg across his chest and bowed, preparing to make his leave. Celestia nodded her head in return, acknowledging his gesture, before he turned and slipped out the door.

Luna let her eyes slide closed as she rested, enjoying the softness of the plush red cushion. She opened the one eye that was not obscured by a lock of blue hair. The white marble floor was polished to a mirror shine, and Luna stared into the reflection of the fireplace. Celestia's taste in furnishing always struck Luna as a bit... *flashy*, but what was one to expect from the goddess of the sun?

Celestia too seemed lost in her own thoughts, caught in a comfortable stare. Luna begrudgingly picked herself up off of the large cushion and made her way over to Celestia, who snapped out of her trance once Luna began to move. Luna brought the tip of her muzzle to her sister's, "Goodnight, Tia."

"Going to sleep?" Celestia asked, sounding somewhat surprised.

"Yes. Hence the 'goodnight'." Luna answered with a smirk, "Why?"

Celestia shrugged her wings. "Ordinarily this time of night you're up and about, and bothering me about sleeping the night away."

"Hmmm, I could think of many words to describe recent events. *Ordinary*, is not one of them." Celestia smiled, acknowledging Luna's point.

Luna continued, "But otherwise you'd be correct. *Unfortunately* a rather alarming scroll popped into my chamber and ruined my

sleep, something about an emergency with our special guest. It made it very difficult to get back to bed. So if you'll excuse me..." She made her way to the door.

"Goodnight, Luna."

"Goodnight, Celestia. Wake me in a few hours. In the mean time, I may suggest you take some of your own advice and get some rest yourself."

"*Goodnight* Luna." With one final laugh Luna disappeared out the door, into the dark of the hallway.

~~~~~

"He's not going for it." "Yes, I can see that." Aegis said, somewhat irritated. "What should we do?" "Nothing we *can* do. Unless you wanna go in and hold him down while we jam food down his throat."

The guard shrank back, hoping sincerely the Commander was joking.

Aegis continued to stare through the tiny hole. It had been sitting there for almost an hour. It was leaning forward elbows on its knees, resting its forehead on the palms of its hands. Aegis himself had gone in about forty five minutes ago. He brought in a small dish of hay. He moved in, stopping the middle of the cell. The entire time the alien eyed him from his sitting place on the cot. It was not a threatened or hostile gaze, which surprised Aegis. He simply looked tired, tired and defeated. Aegis set the plate down and looked at the creature. It looked back. Aegis knew this look. It was the look of a broken soul. Aegis found it dangerously similar to the look of malaise a wild tiger would get after being caged and set on display in the Zoo. A good portion of the area around his eye was dark purple. The eye itself was shut, but the swelling seemed to have gone down, and even the spit skin stopped bleeding. There were still several long rents along his arms where shattered glass had sliced his hide.

The human looked down at the plate. He let out a short puff of air

from his nostrils and looked back up at Aegis with the ghost of a smile.

Aegis was unsure of how to act. As far as he knew he hadn't done anything funny. Perhaps he had offended it somehow. He merely nodded at the creature. It nodded back, seemingly amused. He lifted his right arm and touched the tip of his hand to his lips and lowered it, palm out, before folding it and resting back on his knee.

Unsure what to make of the gesture the Commander finally turned and left, leaving the plate of food for the creature.

Since then it hadn't made any sort of move for the food. Nor had he moved from that spot. The princesses would be here soon. He resigned himself to wait and left the tiny window on the cell to attend to his other duties.

~~~~~

Rarity woke early, as she always did. She stretched under the covers of her luxurious four poster bed. It took her a second to recall she was in Canterlot and not her boutique, and immediately the memories of the past few days came rushing back into her mind. For a moment she merely enjoyed the warmth of the covers. Her body yearned to stay in bed and nap, but she had to prepare herself for the day ahead. She sat up and opened her eyes. The world was still dark. She pushed up the frilly eye mask she wore at night and sunlight assaulted her retinas. She squinted until her eyes adjusted.

She removed herself of the sheets and made her way to the attached bathroom. She began to take curlers out of her hair, leaving the wavy purple styled mane that she put so much love and attention into. She simply had to look her best, after all, today was the day Celestia promised to introduce them to the human. And she simply *couldn't* have him thinking they were all disheveled slobs now could she? Of course not! First impressions were always the most crucial. She supposed she would have to at least *try* and get Rainbow Dash to brush her mane, not that she ever succeeded before in convincing the stubborn mare of the benefits of proper grooming. At least Applejack made the bare minimum step of brushing her mane and setting it in a pony-tail, even if her mane was always covered in

that Stetson, which was only in style about half of the year.

Rarity had tried once to get a comb through Pinkie Pie's hair. It disappeared into the tight bubblegum curls and was never seen again. Since then she had made no other attempts to tame pink pony's mane.

She dipped the mascara brush into the tube and ran it along the length of her long delicate eyelashes. She fluttered her eyelids a few time experimentally before declaring her artwork satisfactory. She moved onto her favorite blue eye shadow. Careful not to get carried away, she stood back and admired herself in the mirror. "*Perfect.*" It was difficult not be impressed with herself. She had such a stylish mane, and such a sleek white coat. She was confident she would be turning stallion's heads wherever she went.

The fashionista added a few extra frills to her hair, including one of her personal favorites; a diamond hair clip in the shape of her cutie mark.

Once Rarity was satisfied with her appearance, she stepped out into the hallway. Unsurprisingly she was the first one awake, but she noticed Pinkie Pie's door was strangely ajar. She wandered over. "Pinkie? Darling, are you awake?" She received no response. She pushed her way into the room. It was almost an exact copy of her own room. Some furniture was slightly rearranged, but it was all the same furnishings. It was tidy and well kept... Too well kept, especially for Pinkie Pie. The bed was neatly made and looked as if it hadn't been slept in for days. Pinkie Pie's bags were neatly stacked in the corner. Rarity wandered around the room, feeling very much like a private investigator.

She looked on the bed and saw a small square of paper. Rarity's horn glows a soft blue as she lifted the paper before her eyes. It was a short note, unmistakably Pinkie's hoofwriting.

*I'll see you guys down there.*

It wasn't like Pinkie Pie to wake up early for anything. She was usually asleep until mid-afternoon, recovering from last night's party. Rarity decided not to make a large deal of it. Pinkie Pie was

hardly predictable. She would sometimes disappear for days and then pop out of a bowl of sponges announcing she had “won” the game of hide and seek. Rarity smiled as she recalled some of the pink mare’s exploits. She was a sweet girl, if not a bit...*odd*. Her heart was always in the right place.

Rarity left the room, and found Applejack standing in the hallway. As per usual, her long blonde hair was in its traditional ponytail. Rarity noticed the farm pony had her long strands of hair held together with bright red ribbon, tied off in a small bow, rather than the little red scrunchy she usually wore.

It was a slight change, but one that Rarity beamed at, it showed she was at least trying.

“Mornin’” AJ proclaimed happily, through a mouthful of something.

“Hello, Darling.” Rarity replied. Wandering over, and noticing a cart laden with breakfast stuffs she had missed the first time.

“Hungry?”

“Famished.” Rarity trotted up to the cart to examine the spread. It was rather impressive, the cart was piled with fresh fruits and warm pastries, freshly baked bread, and there was a tall pitcher of orange juice. The Princesses certainly knew how to treat their guests.

Rarity levitated a small strawberry to her mouth and nibbled on the red fruit. Fluttershy’s door began to open. Fluttershy poked her head out and inspected the hallway carefully before noticing AJ and Rarity and happily trotting over.

“Hello, dear.” Rarity greeted. Before Fluttershy had a chance to respond. Twilight spilled out of her room, her hair was in a fluster. She clearly had gotten up in a hurry, “What time is it?!” she demanded of the group. “Am I late? I forgot to bring an alarm!” “Whoa, there ponygirl.” Applejack said, smiling. “Yer right on time. I figure the Princess must intend tah toss us right on inta’ the thick a’ things cuz she had some chow left here for us. Eat up while ya gotta chance.”

Clearly relieved Twilight made her way over and began to eat with the others. “What about Dash and Pinkie Pie?” Fluttershy asked in that annoying tiny print. “Pinkie Pie wasn’t in her room when I went to check.” Rarity announced, earning a few confused looks from the collective group. “There was just this note on the bed saying she’d ‘meet us down there’.” Rarity explained.

“I don’t remember Pinkie Pie coming with us when we went to the dungeon. Do you guys?” They all shook their head. “Did anyone see her since then?” Again they all shook their heads. “How did she know we were going to go back down today? And why does she need to meet us down there? Why not go down *with* us?” Nopony had an answer.

“Ah think were forgetn’ who we’re talkin’ about here. It *IS* Pinkie Pie after all.” They couldn’t help but agree. “I reckon somepony oughta go wake up Dash though. I swear that pony’d sleep the entire day away if ya let her.” AJ mused disapprovingly.

A wisp of smoke blew up the hallway and wafted over to the group before condensing and materializing into a scroll with a sharp pop. Twilight stepped forward and magically caught and opened the scroll. She read aloud. “*I hope you’ve all had a chance to grab something to eat. I apologize, but I did not believe we had time for a formal breakfast. I would like to get started as soon as possible. Meet me in the lounge whenever your ready, I would like to go over a few things with you. Signed Princess Celestia.*” She set the note on the tray. “I guess we better get going then. AJ, will you grab Dash?” She stuffed a cinnamon croissant roll in her mouth before straightening her mane with a quick spell.

After a few seconds, AJ dragged a still sleeping Rainbow Dash out of her room by the tail. The sleeping pegasus occasionally flapped a wing in response to some unconscious reflex. Maybe she was dreaming. AJ poked her a few times, she shifted and groaned but then fell immediately back to sleep.

Twilight never did take to the idea of being late for anything. Horn glowing she made her way over to Dash. Twilight lowered her head and touched the tip of her horn to Rainbow’s flank. A spark arced off and delivered a small jolt into the cerulean pegasus. Rainbow

shot up with a yelp, wide awake, but very confused. She glared around, breathing heavily.

“What the hay?!” Was all she had time to say before Twilight began to shove her down the hallway.

“C’mon,” She said while pushing the colorful pegasus across the marbled floor,

“We can’t get behind schedule, the Princess is counting on us.”

“What for, where are we going?!” The pegasus began to flap her wings, rising above Twilight’s pushing hooves.

“We’re meeting the Princess before we see the alien. So hurry up she’s already waiting for us!”

“Really?!” She exclaimed, suddenly very excited, “We get to go see it? Let’s go!” With that she shot down the hallway and down the stairs, leaving the group in a cloud of dust.

Twilight tapped a hoof for a moment, waiting. Rainbow Dash slowly flapped back up the stairs, and hovered awkwardly at the end of the hallway. She rubbed the back of her head with a hoof. “Where are we meeting her again?”

Twilight shook her head, and the group proceeded down the stairs on their way to the lounge.

~~~~~

“Have I missed anything exciting?” Luna queried of one of the Royal Guards standing watch outside the cell.

“No Ma’am. He hasn’t said a word since you left.”

“Did somepony try talking to him?”

“The Guard Commander, went inside early this morning, but as far as far as I am aware no words were exchanged.”

“I see.” Luna was already making plans to question the stallion



upon their next meeting. *Speaking of which.* “Where is the Commander now?” She asked the young lieutenant.

“He left to attend other pressing duties. He assured me he would be returning shortly.”

“Consider him returned.” Aegis trotted up to the group, slightly out of breath.

“Wonderful, you’re just in time.” Luna perked up at the guard commander.

“Celestia will be bringing the Elements of Harmony down shortly. In the mean time I feel it would be polite to... *warn* him of the meeting.”

“Very well, Your Majesty.”

Luna regarded him with suspicious amusement for a moment. “No arguments?”

“Would it do any good?” he asked, wearily.

She smiled, “Probably not.”

“Then I shall save my breath. I clearly cannot dissuade you two. I am left with no choice other than to trust you know what you are doing... or are capable of diffusing the situation, should I be proven wrong.”

“You won’t. Your trust is well placed Commander, I assure you.” There was a slight pause. Luna waited for the Commander to respond, but if he had some witty remark or cynical anecdote ready, he didn’t share it. “So what is this I hear about you going inside?”

Aegis stiffened, “Yes. I went in to offer him something to eat.”

“What?!” Luna said suddenly alarmed, “Did he ask for food?! What did you give him?!” The Commander backpedaled a few steps, surprised and confused by the outburst. “It was just a bit of hay, but he didn’t even touch it. That’s all,” he assured.

Luna relaxed. Not that she thought he would actually feed the creature... well another creature. Apparently nopony had told the Commander about its presumed dietary habits.

"I don't think he eats hay, Commander." Luna corrected.

"Well then what does he eat?"

"*Meat.*" She said bluntly.

"We don't *have* any meat. What are we going to feed this thing?" He let the question hang in the air a moment. Luna tapped her chin with a hoof in thought.

"Do you have any reservists you aren't using? You know, maybe some ponies you don't really '*need*'?"

The color in his face drained. His jaw hung slightly open.

"Oh come now, I was just joking!"

"That's not funny."

"Yes it was." She put her nose in the air, flippantly, "You clearly can not comprehend such advanced humor. And don't worry we'll think of something. I don't believe it's *strictly* carnivorous. The I.V. drips kept him alive while he was unconscious. We know what his body needs to survive. Unfortunately now that he's awake..." Luna shrugged her wings. "We'll think of something." She assured him. "We always do." Luna trotted up to the door once again. She peered through the tiny window slide. He was sitting on the cot, staring at the wall. His expression could not be deciphered. He just sat there, apparently lost in an absentminded stare.

Luna backed away from the door and closed the slide as quietly as she could. "Regardless I need to go in and have a few words. So if you would," she gestured toward the door.

He nodded and began the complex process of unsealing the door. Luna waited patiently for the gap to become large enough to accommodate her. She slid inside, shutting the door behind her.

Shane looked up at the blue alicorn. He rested his head on his hands in a fashion that obscured most of his mouth. He didn't get up, or bow, or greet the Princess in any form. His eyes were the only things that recognized her presence. His left eye was barely open, the skin surrounding it was purple, along with a long U shaped mark on his forehead.

"Good morning." She offered sunnily. He didn't respond. He blinked and continued to stare, as if the greeting were merely a formality that need not be addressed.

"Did you sleep?" She asked, growing uncomfortable with his silence.

He closed his eyes for a short second before shaking his head. At least it was an answer.

Luna mused on his sudden brooding, relatively calm, demeanor, she wondered at it. It was a radical change from yesterday, although she had no difficulty understanding why. His was a sad story. But there was something else to it. Seeing the fight sucked out of an admittedly fierce creature. It was like a pegasus robbed of their wings. Although this was no pegasus, and she certainly wasn't planning on returning his wings... not yet, at least.

"How are you feeling?" she prodded with her questions, attempting to draw the human out.

He lifted his head and balled his fingers before resting his chin on a fist. "Like I got kicked in the head by a horse," he deadpanned.

Luna smiled weakly. "Do you need anything?"

"Nothing you could give me," he said, with a sense of finality. He surprised Luna when he flashed her a ghost of a smile and added, "but thanks anyway."

Luna smiled back, taking it as a sign of progress.

"So what brings you to my cozy little... *room*? Did you come all the way down here to make small talk? Or did you just miss me?"

Luna was pleased to see he had not lost his sense of humor, unusual though it may be.

“I came with a warning, actually.” Luna sat on her haunches, noticing that she now had his full attention. “Celestia and I are not the only ones who have an interest in you. There are several others who saw to your recovery.”

He listened without comment, but she could see the uneasiness behind his eyes.

“They would very much like to meet you.” The look on his face told Luna that he was not fond of the idea.

“What’s the catch?”

“Hmm?”

“I would assume normal introductions would not require a *warning*, which leads me to believe that this *isn’t* a normal introduction. So I would ask again... *what’s the catch.*”

“They’re completely harmless, I assure you. But they are... young, and all things the term implies. And *very* curious about you. I came here only to go over a few things prior, and yes, warn you that they might be a bit... *overwhelming.*”

He rubbed his temples with the palms of his hands. “Bring it on,” he droned.

“There are six of them, all girls. I’ll let them introduce themselves, if they so wish.”

“Great... teenage girls... that’ll help make the headache go away.” He said, sarcasm practically dripping from his teeth.

Luna fought the urge to giggle, she liked Twilight and her friends, but they *did* tend to give her a headache when they all started talking at once.

“Be nice,” she chided. “They’re hardly teenagers anymore I would imagine. Regardless, they’ve done a lot for you. And intentionally

or not you have put them though a lot as well.”

“Don’t pull that, ‘you owe us’ bullshit. No one asked you to save me.” He said irritably.

“Well we did. And that’s another thing. Try to tone down the swearing.”

He actually cracked a smile and laughed at that.

Luna found herself chuckling lightly as well. Her eyes fell down to the plate resting on the floor. A small pile of hay still stacked upon it.

“I suppose this is a stupid question, but you don’t eat grass do you?”

“No,” he said, still grinning slightly.

“What do you eat?” She asked already knowing the answer. He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Besides *that*,” she added.

“I’ll bet he liiikes... cuuuupcaaaaaakes!” A new voice announced in a bubbly sing song voice.

Luna spun around to find Pinkie Pie standing proudly next to a tray of pastries. Luna’s jaw worked back and forth as she tried to give voice to her bewilderment. She looked back and forth between the pink earth pony and the locked cell door for several seconds.

Pinkie Pie took full advantage of the silence to prance forward. “Hi! I’m Pinkie Pie! What’s your name? Pfft Silly, I *ALREADY* know your name. That’s not why I’m here. I’m *here* to give you’re your very own super special, ‘*Welcome to Equestria, Glad You’re Not Dead*’ cupcake!” She finally took a moment to suck in a deep breath.

Shane looked back and forth from Luna to Pinkie Pie, textbook confusion dominating his appearance. He said nothing, but carefully studied Pinkie Pie as she gingerly lifted a cupcake out from its metal tray.

The pink pony started toward the human, and Luna watched with equal parts fascination and bewilderment, to see how he would react. They probably should have started him off with a more... *sane* pony. Then again, maybe it was best to get it out of the way now. It may make the rest seem a bit less overwhelming. Pinkie Plopped herself down in front of where the human was sitting and proffered the sugary treat.

Shane leaned forward and inspected the pony. He very slowly reached a hand and carefully poked the young mare with a finger, as if to ensure she was actually real. She giggled slightly and lifted the cake up to him. He shifted his attention to the desert. Sure enough, 'Welcome to Equestria, Glad You're Not Dead' was scribbled out in thin white frosting atop the cake.

"Go on," Pinkie Pie encouraged, pushing it along the floor towards him, "try it."

"Umm... No, thank you. I'm uh... not hungry," he refused as politely as he could.

"Don't be silly, You haven't eaten since you woke up," she countered cheerfully.

"How do you know that?"

"Just try it. You'll liiiiiiike iiiiiit."

"No thaaaank yooouuu. Take a hint, kiiiiiid."

"I made it just for you." Her cheerfulness was starting to fade.

"I don't want it." He was growing irritated as well.

"Eat it." Pinkie ordered in a flat tone, no more smile.

"No."

Pinkie's eyes narrowed and pushed her head forward threateningly. He did the same, gaze narrow and challenging.

"Eat the cupcake." She ordered one last time.

Shane drew in a deep breath and began a long exaggerated, “Nnnnoooooooooooooo-PTHH AHCK PFFT,” Which was the sound he made when Pinkie Pie stuffed the pastry into his mouth, before beaming an exuberant smile.

“Pinkie Pie!” Luna shouted, horrified.

Shane stood still choking slightly and backed against the wall, apparently just as shocked at the move as Luna was. He coughed through the mouth of cake. He made a move to spit it out, but stopped. He chewed once, twice. He looked at Pinkie Pie who had smile wide enough to split her head in two. He studied Pinkie Pie again wide eyes slowly narrowing, now suddenly fascinated by the pony.

“Is this *real* sugar?” He said through a cheek full of cupcake.

“Well, duh! You can’t have cupcakes without sugar!” she stated obviously.

"Jesus," he breathed to himself. He looked around the room without really seeing it, focusing most of his sensory attention on his taste buds. "I haven't had real sugar since I was seventeen." He looked as if he might break into tears.

"You don't have *sugar* where you come from?" Pinkie asked, mortified.

“We have it, it’s just fuckin’ expensive.” He swallowed, neck muscles moving slightly as the remaining cake disappeared down his gullet. He ran his tongue over his teeth a few times, looking very satisfied.

“Yay!” Pinkie Began bouncing around, excitedly. “He likes it!” Shane sat back down on his cot and Pinkie hopped up next to him. To Luna’s surprise he did not protest the proximity, although he did not seem overly happy about it.

Pinkie looked around, distastefully “Bleh, You been stuck in here for like *two days?! Boooooorrrriiiiing.*” She continued talking, about nothing in particular, mostly about things she would do to liven up

the cell, which she declared wholly unfit for a party, although she was quite fond of the padded floor and walls.

“Omigosh! How ruuude!” she declared out of nowhere. She hopped off the cot and over to her cupcake tray. She took the tray in her teeth and walked them over to the Princess. “Ah’ frrgot ta offr yooood un too, Piness,” she made out from between the tray in her teeth.

Luna chuckled softly, she wasn’t really hungry but she thought it would be good for the human to see her have one as well. “Thank you, my dear. They look lovely.” Pinkie trotted back to the cot. “Wan’ an’utha one?”

Shane looked cautiously back at Luna who smiled and gave him an encouraging nod. He deftly lifted a cake with two fingers. “Thank you?” he said, uncertainly. Pinkie Pie hopped up back to her seat on the other side of the cot, and selected a cupcake for herself, which disappeared down her throat faster than any civilized meal should. Followed shortly by a very unladylike burp. Pinkie quickly clasped a hoof over her mouth initially embarrassed, but she soon began to giggle from behind her pink appendage.

Shane reached up and scratched the top of Pinkie’s head. She didn’t seem to mind. In fact she seemed to push back against his hand. She truly harbored no fear of the creature. The sight filled Luna’s heart with a strange warmth. “Belt-fed little thing, isn’t she?” He posed the question toward Luna, as if Pinkie weren’t there at all.

“She is indeed.” Luna agreed, having a fairly good idea of what he meant by the strange term. Much to Pinkie’s apparent dissatisfaction, the human directed his attention back toward the cupcake in his right hand. He glanced at Luna, who was nibbling on her own cake. He bit off a large corner of the confection. A small smile spread across his face as he chewed.

“What’s funny?” Luna asked.

He shook his head and swallowed. “Nothing.” He twirled the cupcake around in his hands, before popping what was left into his mouth and chewing with a satisfied sigh. Luna couldn’t help but smile as well. It was a small victory in a sea of losses. Although the



day was far from over, they had overcome their first challenge. Luna folded her legs beneath her and rested on the padded floor. She flared her wings out and stretched. She looked back up to find that Shane had stopped eating his cupcake to watch Luna. She suddenly felt very self conscious under his critical gaze. She folded her wings back against her side. Silence began to grow. The only real sound was Pinkie Pie, loudly devouring another cupcake.

“Do they work?”

“What?” Luna asked, already a fair idea of what he meant.

He nodded toward her back. “The wings, do they work?”

“Of course,” she answered slightly amused. “I take it you don’t have pegasus ponies where you’re from.”

He shook his head. “None with horns either.”

“You have earth ponies though, right?” Pinkie chimed in, through a mouthful of cake.

“If by ‘*earth* ponies’ you just mean normal ponies, then sure, but they aren’t anything like you. You don’t even look like them. Our ponies are just...well, animals. They don’t talk or think, beyond pure instinct. You don’t even look like them. You guys are more... evolved, I guess. You’re thinner, your heads are more rounded, smaller snouts, larger eyes. None of ours have wings, or horns... definitely none with both.” “Interesting.” Luna contemplated his words.

“What are you, exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“You and your sister are the only ones I’ve seen with both. Why?”

“It is the way we are. Celestia and I are called Alicorns, very few exist.”

“Alicorns,” he repeated rolling the word around in his mouth. “I guess ‘pegasus-unicorn’ was just too clunky for ordinary

conversation then, huh?”

“For one who has never encountered either, you seem fairly familiar with the terms.” Luna recalled never having mentioned unicorns, which meant he had picked it up on his own, somewhere.

He took a deep breath, trying to find a way to successfully explain. “Unicorns and pegasuses-”

“Pegasi,” she corrected.

“Whatever, they don’t exist where I’m from, but the *idea* of them exists. If that makes sense. They were always just a fantastical bedtime story, they weren’t real.”

“Interesting,” Luna said absentmindedly, amused with the thought of being a bedtime story. “You had knowledge of us, *prior* to experience.”

“Not really knowledge, more like... conjecture. We didn’t really know of you, it just fictional amusement steeped in ancient mythology.”

“You have mythology about ponies?” Luna was curious about what manner of stories these humans were telling about her kind.

“Sort of. More like stories and ancient superstition. ‘Pegasus’ was the name of a winged horse that served the gods, brought lightning, and defeated the chimera, all sorts of fun stuff.”

“You have Chimeras as well then?”

“No it’s just anoth- wait... *YOU* have chimeras?”

“A few, last time I checked,” she said trying to recall the last time she had seen one.

“What kind of fuckin’ fantasy land is this?!” he demanded, irritated. He slumped back against the wall and crossed his arms, muttering something about ‘imaginary bullshit’.

“These creatures are also fictional in your world?” Luna questioned.

“Yes, *chimeras* do not exist in my world.”

“Strange, you are aware of many of our native species, yet no pony records speak of your kind, in song nor legend.”

“If you’re seeking logical answers from this mess, then I think you’re setting yourself up for disappointment there, Princess.” He leaned up and looked over at the pink earth pony occupying the other side of his cot. Pinkie had remained quiet for the majority of the conversation. Her mouth was quite occupied devouring its way through the cupcakes which she seemed to have forgotten were for the human.

Pinkie realized she was being stared at. “What?” she asked through the cake in her mouth, “it’s good!”

Shane scooted a bit away from Pinkie Pie, onto the far edge of the cot.

~~~~~

Twilight stopped behind Celestia, followed closely by her five friends. There was a larger number of guards present this time. Twilight wondered inwardly if the increase in security had something do with their visit.

Celestia turned and addressed the collective group, minus Pinkie Pie of course, who was still nowhere in sight. “Alright girls remember what I told you, be polite, try to keep questions light, ask them *one at a time*,” she put extra stress on that bit, “absolutely *no* touching, stay behind me at all times, try to avoid making sudden moves, introduce yourselves, be clear, and remember he is not familiar with our cultural niceties and can be a bit... *abrasive*, so try not to take offense it may just be a misunderstanding. Are we all clear?” She looked over the group.

All the girls nodded enthusiastically, impatient to get inside and see the alien awake. Fluttershy pranced forward eagerly. Her willingness to enter a small room with an alien who had a history of violence confused Twilight at first, but the more she thought about it the more sense it made. Fluttershy only seemed... well *shy* around

other ponies. The mare had walked up to a rampaging Manticore without blinking.

Fluttershy held the handle of a white box emblazoned with a red cross firmly in her teeth. Her smile could be seen even through the handle in her mouth. Celestia held a wing out to block the young pegasus' path.

"Remember, my dear, *ONLY* if you ask his permission first. I hate to say it but I'm not so sure you left him with the greatest of impressions upon your last meeting."

Fluttershy nodded and said something that sounded something like an affirmative but whatever she actually said was lost in the handle between her teeth. Celestia moved to the door and motioned for the guards to take up their usual positions on either side. The guard commander approached Twilight. He stood at her side and watched the guards form their ranks on either side. Without turning to face her he said in an undertone, "You don't have to go in if you don't want to."

Twilight shot him an unusual look. "I'll be fine. You worry too much."

He seemed far less than pleased with her response. His face darkened. "Twilight, that thing could have killed you."

"But it didn't. It even apologized... sort of. Everything that has happened so far has been a tragic misunderstanding. I have the power to fix it and I will."

Aegis' jaw clenched. He was clearly biting his tongue to prevent some glib remark from breaking free.

Muffled voices could be heard from the other side of the door, which drew everypony's attention. It sounded vaguely like shouting, but the thick door made certainty impossible.

"Alright girls," Celestia said, her voice a mixture of excitement and trepidation, "are you ready?"

With Fluttershy leading the pack with obvious enthusiasm, the girls

all stacked up in front of the door and waited.

"I'm going to go in first. Luna should already have already... *notified* him of our visit today." Celestia's horn lit, bathing the room in a soft golden shadow, and the subtle clinking of tiny machines could be heard, working from their hiding places within the wall.

Twilight's heart pumped inside her chest. She did her best to maintain the illusion of composure. She quickly stole a glance at the other girls. Fluttershy stood uncomfortably close behind Celestia, anxious to do what she did best. Applejack was doing a poor job of masking her discomfort with the whole situation. Rarity's nose was in the air, busy as she was to look as dignified as possible. The studied inattention on Rainbow Dash's part made Twilight feel slightly better. The mare was obviously putting on a brave face to reinforce her 'tough-guy' disposition, but the idea that somepony could be so aloof, considering the circumstances, helped relieve the tension. Plus the thought of studying the alien was far too enticing to pass up. It was a scientist's dream. Twilight had no intention of letting such a didactic moment slip through her grasp. Besides, the Princess would be there this time. Nothing would go wrong.

The heavy door slowly swung inward. The crack between the wall and door grew ever wider in a painfully deliberate pace. Twilight took a deep breath the cool dungeon air. As soon her lungs could be filled she held it for a moment, before parting her lips and allowing the breath to rejoin the atmosphere. Her heart still hammered as the door continued to open, now wide enough to accommodate Celestia. The snow white sun princess held up a wing to keep Fluttershy from slipping in behind her. Celestia poked her head inside the opening. Her slender white frame soon followed, disappearing completely inside the room. Twilight adjusted her saddlebags as she repeated the words to herself while taking the first steps toward the cell.

*"The Princess is here. Nothing will go wrong. Nothing will go wrong. Nothing. Will. Go. Wrong."*

"It does NOT!" The human argued vehemently.

“IT DOES!!!” Pinkie Pie shouted back, just as angrily.

The squabble between the two had been growing for several minutes. Originally Luna was content to see how the small debate would play out. At first it seemed to be nothing more than a fun topic of interest, but soon the dispute began to grow in intensity. Neither side was willing to yield ground the argument rapidly grew heated. At a point Luna was slightly shamed to admit she was afraid to insert herself between them lest the argument turn feral.

“Peppermints do *NOT* count as candy!” he reiterated.

“They *TOTALLY* do! Why shouldn’t they?”

The fact that neither party seemed able to provide sufficient evidence to back up their claims, soon led the debate to become simply a contest to see who could repeat their points louder. Luna feared they would soon be screaming at one another. For the moment she was merely glad neither had resorted to blows.

“Nobody goes, ‘hmm I have such a sweet tooth, I think I’ll grab a *breath mint*’, do you think breath mints are candy?” he challenged the bubblegum pony. Luna had to admit, she had never seen any ponies fight so avidly for something Luna considered so inane. She was unsure whether to be impressed at their passion or censorious of their inconsequentiality.

“Breath mints are obviously different!” she retorted.

“Obviously how?! A mint is a mint! How is it any different?”

“Of course *breath mints* don’t count as candy. I mean, *DUH*. Everypony knows that. But a peppermint does! They’re called *CANDY* canes, after all.” Shane immediately turned on Luna. “*You* have been too quiet. Who’s right? Do peppermints count as candy or not?!”

Both Shane and Pinkie Pie stared intently at Luna, who felt extremely uncomfortable under their pressuring eyes. “I’d, actually, prefer *not* to take sides.” She affirmed.

Shane threw up an accusatory finger. “Coward! Quit riding the

fence. Now is the time to declare yourself!" he demanded.

The metallic sound of tiny machines clicking out of place broke the awkward silence that was pressing against Luna like a suffocating blanket. All heads turned to the door, ears straining to hear the distinct sound of clinking levers and bolts.

"They're here. It's time." Luna announced with finality. *And not a moment too soon*, she thought, grateful for the change of subject.

Shane turned back around to Pinkie Pie. He pointed a lone finger down at the young girl. "This isn't over," he notified. He sat back down on his end of the cot, this time much further from Pinkie Pie's side, which she seemed to have commandeered for herself.

"Are you ready?"

"What happens if I'm not?" he asked, sounding apprehensive.

"They come in anyway," Luna admitted.

"I'm noticing a trend here," he said sardonically.

The door suddenly began to inch inward. The heavy door was slow. Its leisurely pace was not making the anticipation any easier to bare. The gap between the door and frame was slowly becoming larger. Luna anxiously awaited the arrival of her sister and pupil. She was eager to how the human reacted to normal ponies. Shane seemed to tolerate Celestia and herself well enough, but *tolerate* seemed to be the extent of his feelings for the two. He didn't seem overly fond of anypony so far. Needless to say he hadn't had an exceedingly positive experience when it came to her species. She hoped he would at least receive them well enough. Luna and her sister were hardly good representatives of pony society. Luna was also highly interested in seeing if he would be able to form social bonds beyond the instinctual.

Celestia's nose poked inside as she took in the scene of the room. She looked first at the human. Her face became highly confused when she beheld Pinkie Pie sitting on the opposite side of the cot. Celestia shot a questioning glance at her sister that bordered on

alarm.

Luna shrugged her wings. Celestia merely looked tired as she pushed her way inside. She did not go and sit by her sister, however. Celestia instead, stood in front of the door, in preparation for the coming guests. The act reminded Luna very much of a crossing guard escorting little school children across the street.

She glanced back at the human who was busy eyeing Celestia with a poorly concealed uncertainty. Celestia watched him as well. This time her stare was much less warm. Celestia was giving the human a warning look, the kind her normally kindhearted sister would rarely adopt. Luna secretly wondered if her sister was attempting to send a message with her countenance. Perhaps she wanted to drive home the point that no iniquitous behavior would be tolerated around the young mares.

The first of the five popped inside the room with a bubblyness that was normally reserved for Pinkie Pie alone. One of the few elements the human had encountered before, and admittedly, the only other one that Luna was concerned about; Fluttershy. He did not seem to enjoy his last encounter with Fluttershy. She was apprehensive to see what manner of response seeing her again would evoke.

Fluttershy trotted inside carrying a bright white box with an emblazoned red cross on the front. The handle of the medical case was clutched firmly in her teeth, although her smile was evident despite the fact. Luna shifted her attention back to the human who had been too busy matching Celestia's stare to pay any real mind to the newest arrival.

"How come Pinkie Pie got in first?" Dash demanded as she stuck her head in second.

She saw his gaze flick fleetingly to the little pegasus. He did a double-take of Fluttershy, this time his whole head swiveling.

He immediately went stiff. He diverted his eyes and stared at the opposite wall. "What the hell?! Why is she here?!" He threw up a finger in Fluttershy's direction.



“Calm down she just wants to help.” Luna assured.

“You keep saying that. You guys have a pretty fucked idea of *help*.” He was still facing the other wall.

Fluttershy had stopped head in her tracks. The med kit still hung in her teeth, but her former bubbly demeanor had vanished. The young mare looked devastated. This was exactly what Luna feared. He must hate her for what she did.

Celestia stepped forward and spoke. “Shane, she’s only here to talk. She isn’t going to use the stare again. We don’t have to keep doing this. This ‘us versus you’ relationship must end. We’re all on the same team here. I admit, unfortunate mistakes have been made. But I can not change the past. And as difficult as it may be, you need to trust that we are trying our best to help you.”

“Forgive me, if I don’t share you optimistic outlook. But it seems like every time you have tried to *help*, I ended up bruised and in chains. You say we need trust and yet you bring your little... *weapon* with you. I’m not feelin’ the trust here, Princess. You want my trust? Earn it. Start by getting rid of the girl.”

Twilight made her way out from behind Celestia. The young mare haltingly worked her way out from behind Celestia and over to where the human sat. She stopped about halfway into the room. Celestia eyed her carefully. Luna wondered what the young girl was playing at.

“Shane?” Twilight said in a soft questioning voice.

He froze at the sound of her voice. He even dared to turn his head enough to peek at Twilight through the corner of his eye. Something about her must have grabbed his attention because he seemed to forget about Fluttershy entirely. He turned his entire head to see the purple pony. He opened his mouth slightly as if attempting to speak but he forced it shut an instant later. He seemed to catch a glimpse of Fluttershy in his peripheral, because his head snapped back to the opposing wall, looking very disturbed.

“We just wanted to meet you.” Twilight was speaking in as soothing

as soothing a voice as she could, "We're not going to hurt you," she assured.

He let out a hot puff of air from his nose, as if the notion both amused and annoyed him. Twilight either didn't notice or was ignoring it because she continued unfazed. "I know it might be difficult for you to believe, but I promise Fluttershy was just trying to help. She isn't going to use the stare again. Just let her stay." Twilight stopped to see if he had had an answer. His brow furrowed but he made no indication answering. "Please?" Twilight added.

This time he turned back to face Twilight. An unidentifiable emotion in his eyes. It could have been longing, or fear, or anger, maybe all three. Luna wasn't sure.

"She faces the corner. She will not move. She will not talk."

"Don't you think that's a bit-"

"That's the deal. Take it or leave it," he interrupted, "This is as far as I bend."

He left very little room to maneuver. Luna was uncomfortable with his demands. Maybe it was fair; after all, Fluttershy hadn't exactly been delicate when they last met. Twilight looked back at Celestia for answers. The princess, however, offered no council. Instead Celestia simply watched the human, her own face inscrutable.

Realizing the situation was hers to rectify, Twilight turned back around, and faced the human. "We aren't going to make Fluttershy *face the wall*," she said, resolutely, "I understand you might not trust her but she was only trying to help you. If you would just give her a chance-"

"It's okay, Twilight," came a tiny voice from behind, "I don't mind. I understand." Fluttershy picked up the case in her mouth once more, and although some residual tears clung to the corners of her eyes, she seemed happy that she was at least not being kicked out of the room. She had her hoof in the door, so to speak, and maybe from there she would be able to slowly gain his faith. It was a small step, but it was progress. She made her way to the far corner of the

room and sat down, consigned to wait.

Luna took an extreme interest in his reaction to Twilight. He definitely remembered her. She could think of no other reason for him to act that way. She hated to admit she felt a pang of jealousy at the fact that Twilight had been able to win some ground against the human so easily. He allowed Fluttershy to stay just because Twilight said please? It had taken Luna arguing and prodding just to get him to talk, much less win an argument. She made a mental note to keep track of the phenomenon.

Celestia stepped forward “Major, if I may make introductions. I believe you have already met Miss Fluttershy, and also apparently Pinkie Pie. The ones you haven’t met; Applejack,” Celestia nodded toward the orange earth pony, who tipped her hat slightly, “Rarity,” she motioned toward the white unicorn, “and Rainbow Dash.” Dash flared her wings and beamed proudly. “And this is Twilight Sparkle, whom I believe you have also... *met*.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Shane commented quietly. He stared at the purple unicorn awkwardly for a moment. “I uh... I’m... sorry, about *that*, by the way.” Twilight looked at him, appearing confused. “You know... the whole...” he fumbled with his words for a moment before just slashing a thumb across his throat and clicked his tongue, “thing.”

Twilight was about to respond, but suddenly Rainbow Dash blitzed over and landed in the center of the room.

“Great that’s settled. Now, I have some questions for you.” Rainbow Dash came on a bit strong, but it certainly changed the pace quickly. When Rainbow wanted something, she was famously impatient for anything that impeded her obtaining it. She wanted answers and by Celestia, she was going to get them. “First of all; who taught you to speak Equestrian?” Dash was shouting a bit more than she normally did.

Everypony suddenly became very interested in his pending answer.

Luna herself was very curious about this as well, and awaited his reply with enthusiasm.

He slowly turned his head, not even acknowledging Dash's question. He took a fleeting glance at Fluttershy who, true to her word was sitting in the corner. He continued to watch her for a moment, as if to make certain the dangerous end would remain pointed in a safe direction.

"Um...helloooo? I'm talking to you." Dash reminded impatiently. He returned his attention to the brash young mare in front of him. He inspected her for a moment looking confused, he cocked an eyebrow and looked to Luna. "I'm sorry, who is this again?" he said, sounding impatient and annoyed with the forthrightness of the rude cerulean pegasus.

"*My name*, is Rainbow Dash," she declared hotly, clearly not happy with being ignored.

He looked incredulously at the mare, eyebrow still cocked. "Of course it is." He looked up at Celestia. "Subtlety is not an art you guys practice is it?" Celestia smiled slightly, but gave no response.

"Hey!" Dash shouted.

"What?!" Shane finally acknowledged.

"I asked you a question! How can you speak Equestrian?!"

"I'm not. *YOU'RE* speaking English and I was going to ask you the same thing." His reply was terse and slightly angry. It also answered no questions. Twilight spoke up. "So is that the name of your home? You are English?"

He let out a sarcastic laugh, as he tilted his head to check and make sure Fluttershy was still facing the corner. He turned back to Twilight. "No. *English* is just the language. 'America' is the name of my home country. The United States."

"Which is it?" Applejack finally spoke up.

"It's both," he said eyeing the newest speaker, "It's the United States of America."

"*United States*," twilight rolled the words around in her mouth for a

bit, “so you are a nation made up of smaller nations?”

“Sort of. We have fifty states, capable of operating independently, but all subservient to one governing body, which is made up of different branches.”

“So it’s like an oligarchy?”

“Constitutional republic,” he corrected.

“You do not have a set leader?”

“We have a leader. Every four years we elect president to lead the country, when his four years are up, they step down and a new one is elected. It’s complicated.”

“Fascinating,” Twilight mused. “How many of you are there?”

“*How many?*” The question seemed to confuse him.

“Yeah, like how many humans are there?”

He shrugged, “I don’t know...like eight or nine billion or so, give or take a few hundred million.”

“Is it true you humans eat ponies?” Dash interjected loudly.

Twilight chided, “Dash, I’m sure he doesn’t actually-”

“Yes,” he answered with a grin.

The room went deathly silent. All eyes, with the exception of Fluttershy’s, locked on the human who was clearly enjoying the reaction. Even Pinkie Pie looked a bit horrified. Dash went pale, as the color seemed to drain from her face.

“...re... really?” she stammered, suddenly feeling very delicious.

He chuckled lightly. “No, I’m just messing with you. There are *some* humans that eat horses, but not many.” He was practically reveling in their horror.

“Do you?”

He looked at Rainbow Dash, grin widening into an amused smile. The pegasus seemed to shrink under his eyes. "No." He let the word wash over their ears. An audible sigh of relief could be heard. "Actually in most civilized circles eating horse meat is highly frowned upon. Humans and horses have had a codependent relationship for several hundred years. Humans have kept horses as helpers and companions for a long time. People got attached to them. The use of them as *food* is seen as taboo to say the least... so relax."

"You *kept* them? Like... as pets?" Twilight sounded disturbed.

"Our ponies aren't like you. They're just animals. Basic instincts, no real intelligence, just animals."

"I see... What about you?"

"*What about me?*"

"Yeah, you know, What are *you like*."

"What's your favorite color?" Pinkie added boisterously.

"Green," he said absentmindedly answering Pinkie, "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," she encouraged.

"How about you narrow it down a tad."

"Do ya'll have any family?" Applejack finally spoke.

He turned and noticed the orange mare. He smiled when he saw her, but it quickly started to fade. "None to speak of."

Luna wondered at his evasive answer but did not press him on the subject.

"What does 'U S Marines' mean?" Twilight asked, noticing the bloodstained blouse, and remembering the letters stitched onto the front.

“That’s what I am. I’m a Marine.”

“I thought you were a human.”

“A Marine is a type of human. Our government selects the best humans they can find, then trains them to become Marines. Then they charge us with the protection of the country.”

“You’re like guardians?”

“More like attack dogs,” He mumbled.

“Why do they call you Marines?”

“Because of our maritime heritage. But we have a bunch of names; leatherneck, jarhead, devil dog.”

“Those aren’t very nice names.”

“We aren’t a very nice bunch.”

“Yes, you’ve made that painfully clear.” Luna piped teasingly.

He grew a twisted grin, as if it were a compliment.

“What are the other humans like?” Twilight prodded.

“What do you mean?”

“You know... what are humans like? Explain them to me.”

“You want me to *explain* humanity? Do you know how long that would take?”

“Do you have somewhere better to be?” Dash queried amusedly.

After a brief moment, he actually started to laugh. It was a kind of depraved mocking laugh, as if the grim truth amused him. “I guess not,” he answered in between chuckles. “What are humans like?” he repeated to himself. He shrugged, and glanced over to make sure Fluttershy hadn’t moved. “Humans are... *different*. No two are ever the same. If you’re looking for a nice neat answer then, I’m sorry but there isn’t one. There is a lot of evil in humanity, but there is

also a lot of good. I've seen people all ends of the spectrum. Humans are impossible to label, and without the benefit of years of cultural subtleties I'm afraid anything I tell you is just going to be white noise."

It wasn't the answer she was expecting, but in retrospect Twilight felt slightly silly for asking it. She doubted she would be able to explain all of ponydom in one sitting to a being with zero experience of it.

Twilight's horn glowed softly and she produced a pad of paper from within her saddlebags. She needed to document everything and, whether he meant to or not, he had actually revealed a great deal about his species. They were capable of free will, they understood the concept of good and bad, and therefore possessed some moral center. She had to keep in mind that their 'good and bad' might not be the same as her 'good and bad'; humans might have a different definition for morality than ponies.

Twilight suddenly noticed the deathly quiet in the room. She looked up from her notes and noticed Shane was eyeing her cautiously. She lowered the pad of paper, his eyes followed. She realized it wasn't her he was staring at, but the floating quill and paper. It took her a moment to remember that his was not a magic using species, this must be the first time he has seen it up close.

The human stood up and walked, slowly over to Twilight. Twilight heard Celestia begin to move somewhere behind her. The human looked at the floating objects as one might a puzzle box that needed to be studied and deciphered, he stopped in front of the pad of the quill and paper. He leaned down and inspected them up close, but took care to not touch them.

"How are you doing that?" he asked Twilight, his eyes never leaving the quill.

"Magic." Twilight stated simply.

He snorted. "No, seriously." He waved a hand over and under the quill to make certain there were no strings holding it up.



“I am serious. It’s magic, just a simple manipulation spell.”

“There’s no such thing as magic,” he voiced absentmindedly. He scratched his chin, his fingernails dragging over the short stubble of whiskers. He reached out with his right hand, carefully bringing it closer to the floating quill. He extended his index finger and gingerly made contact with the quill. The aura of Twilight’s purple magic seemed to flicker and dim slightly. He retracted his finger and the aura brightened, becoming normal once again. He touched his finger back to the quill once again, this time leaving it there. The magic didn’t waver this time, but rather suddenly died out completely. The quill fell to the floor of the padded cell, leaving a small black ink dot where the nub fell.

The human nudged the now lifeless quill with the tip of his boot. It remained inanimate. He deftly reached down and plucked it from the floor. Everypony watching him carefully. He studied the quill up close, examining its every detail. Pinching the quill in two fingers he held it out, and released it. It once again fell to the floor.

Twilight lit her horn and channel her magic into the quill, once again wrapping it in the purple light, and lifting it up off the floor.

He watched carefully. “What is it?” he asked intrigued.

“It’s the physical manifestation of magical energies. I can direct them from myself into an object.”

“So it’s magnets?” he concluded.

“What? No. Magic is a complex discipline. It takes years of study and rigorous training. The scope of arcane energy is a precise avocation. Much more complicated than *magnets*.”

He nodded and straightened himself. “Magnets. Got it.” He went and sat back down next to Pinkie Pie.

“It’s not magnets!” Twilight declared, beginning to sound a bit offended.

Rainbow Dash began to chuckle, highly amused by Twilight’s frustration.

Luna stepped forward. "This actually reminds me of something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Shoot," he deadpanned, sounded less than thrilled with all the questions.

"You seem to interfere with our spells. I don't quite understand why. Sometimes they work perfectly fine, other times they have strange side effects, or don't work at all. Would you have any idea what's causing this?"

He shrugged. "My remote doesn't work on my neighbor's TV. Doesn't mean there's something wrong. My remote just wasn't made to work on his TV. If I had to guess, I'd say your magic wasn't made to work on me. But that's just a guess. Magic doesn't exist where I am from."

"I see."

Pinkie Pie was shuffling around on her side of the cot. She shifted herself around as if uncomfortable. A muffled clinking could barely be heard from inside a folded wool blanket. Pinkie Pie poked her nose into the folds of the cover. "Oooh, what are these?" She pulled out her head from under the blanket, several silver chains dangling from her mouth. They swung about a bit, jingling slightly, like a sad little wind chime. Shane immediately snatched them from her mouth. "Don't touch those!" he snapped, shooting her a harsh glare.

Pinkie shrank back some, not sure what she had done wrong. "I'm sorry," she said in a very small voice. "Did I do something bad?"

"No, my dear," Celestia assured in a calming voice. Celestia turned her word to the human. "Shane, she didn't know."

"Know what?" Pinkie prodded, clearly confused.

Shane set the bundle of chains and tags on his lap and began undoing the buttons of his outer cammie blouse. He shrugged it off his shoulders, and tugged on the cuffs, wincing as the fabric brushed against his skin as he pulled his arms out of the sleeves.

Once he was free of the garment he picked up the silver tags off his

lap and placed them on top of the blouse. He folded the fabric over on itself several times, and tied the two sleeves together, sealing the tags inside the bundle of fabric. He placed the bundle on the floor at his feet and scooted it under the cot and out of sight. He sat there brooding for a moment. Everypony seemed to be watching him, but he paid them little to no mind.

“You’re bleeding,” Celestia stated with concern.

At this, Fluttershy spun round looking deeply apprehensive.

He stirred from his gloomy trance, held out his arms and inspected himself. A few of the cuts along his forearms were slowly leaking blood. A few drops slowly worked their way across his hide, leaving a trail of crimson. “Yup,” he surmised, apparently not very surprised by the fact. He watched a bead of red, sluggishly blazing a trail down his skin, looking bored.

“You need to have those looked at,” Celestia pushed.

“I’m looking at them right now,” he said with a sly grin.

“By a doctor,” she added, annoyed.

“Why? You can’t *fix it with magic*?” challenged mockingly.

“We tried using magic to heal you. There were... side effects, and it almost killed you.”

“Wouldn’t *that* have been a shame,” he quipped sarcastically. He looked over at Fluttershy and frowned. “I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to be facing the corner,” he said coldly.

Fluttershy bent down and picked up the medical kit in her teeth and looked at him imploringly.

He glanced at the kit and then back up to Fluttershy. “No,” he said, shooting her down before she could actually ask.

Luna finally spoke up. “Shane she can help, why won’t you let her.”

“I don’t trust her,” he admitted, “she has evil eyes.”

“Just let her wrap your arms. It’ll only take a moment, then she can right back to staring at the corner.”

“No.” He folded his arms, and stuck up his nose, shutting her out.

Luna looked to Twilight. Twilight noticed Luna watching and gave her an inquisitive look. Luna nodded toward the human, then back to Twilight. Twilight seemed confused for a moment, but soon she got the message. Twilight gave the night princess one last uncertain glance. Luna nodded encouragingly.

Twilight stepped forward, Shane noticed her approaching and cocked an eyebrow at the purple filly. “Shane? You need to let Fluttershy help, she’s very gentle, I promise. If you don’t let somepony dress those cuts they’ll get infected. Please will you let Fluttershy help, pleeeaaasse?” Twilight was using her best puppy dog face.

The human appeared impassive, but Luna could tell inside he was considering allowing the little pegasus near.

“No.”

“Why not?” Twilight pushed, disappointed.

“I don’t like her,” he stated, as if she weren’t standing in the room.

“Will ya’ll quit bein’ so stubborn. The girl is tryin’ ta help you. If ya quit bein’ so darn suspicious, you’d see she’s just about the sweetest pony ya’ll could ever meet. Now just let her patch ya’ up or ya’ll are gonna keel over from loss-o blood,” Applejack scolded the human.

He stared at Applejack, apparently surprised by the sudden tongue lashing, but he said nothing.

“Everything will be fine,” Twilight promised. “Trust me.” Shane stared at Twilight for a moment, attempting to find any traces of deceit in the pony’s eyes. He flicked his eyes over to Fluttershy, who was still looking at him with imploring eyes. His brow furrowed and he took a deep breath, staring off into the distance.

Right as Twilight began to fear he was never going to relent. He

held his arms out in front of him, saying nothing, but allowing Fluttershy access to them.

Fluttershy beamed, like a foal on their birthday. She pranced over happily.

Shane stiffened as she approached but did not protest. Instead he busied himself staring into the top corner of the room clenching his jaw.

Fluttershy popped the two latches on the tin case and flipped open the lid. She picked out several sterile pads and a brown bottle of peroxide, along with several rolls of ace wrap. When the human was standing her head might only reach his torso. Even if she were to stand on her hind legs he would still be a few hands taller, but now that he was sitting she had easy access to his extended arms. She began by inspecting each cut closely.

The human jumped slightly when one of her hooves came into contact with his arm, but he said nothing. Fluttershy tried to be more gentle, as she finished examining the lacerations. She went back and removed the lid from the bottle of peroxide. "Um... this, *might* sting a little," she warned.

"Just do it," he sighed, impatiently.

Fluttershy took the bottle in her teeth and slowly tilted her head, allowing the foul smelling brown fluid to spill out over the various wounds.

His jaw tightened but otherwise did not react to the bubbling peroxide on his arms.

Once every wound had been adequately doused, Fluttershy took the first of several sterile gauze pads and placed it over the first laceration. She compressed it down on the cut, causing him to stiffen and his breath to catch.

"I'm really sorry," Fluttershy was quick to apologize.

"Just hurry up," he said through clenched teeth.

Fluttershy quickly grabbed another pad of gauze and placed it over another cut, repeating the process until all the wounds on his arms were covered. She grabbed the first roll of bandages and began wrapping his arms, starting at the wrists and then unrolling the bandages around his arms. She reached his elbow before the first roll ran out. She quickly grabbed another and continued on his upper arms, making sure to leave enough room so that he would not tear open the bandages if he were to flex. She wrapped his other arm and stood back to inspect her handiwork.

“Um...Some of those should really be stitched, but that will do for now.”

He moved his arms, clearly not happy with the slightly restricted mobility, but the bandages held. He finished his inspection and nodded awkwardly at Fluttershy, apparently in thanks.

Celestia was wearing a contented smile. Things were improving. Every inch of ground was hard won, but won all the same. Progress with this human was slow, but steady. She doubted they would ever be able to break down his walls completely, but they had gained precious advancements today. It wouldn't be easy. To gain his trust they were going to have to earn it, and after the events of the past two days, they had a lot to make up for. But Celestia was confident it could be done.

Shane let out a long jaw stretching yawn.

“Tired?” she questioned.

He nodded. “I forgot sugar comes with a crash.” He chuckled nostalgically.

Celestia looked puzzled. She looked to Luna for an answer.

Luna smiled sheepishly. “Apparently aliens like sugar,” she shrugged “who knew?”

“And who gave him sugar?” Celestia asked, curious.

Pinkie Pie raised her hoof. “Oooh Pinkie Pie did! Wait. That's me. I did! I made some cupcakes as a welcome to Equestria present!” She

bounced happily recounting the story.

“Well that was very sweet of you.” Celestia praised, causing Pinkie Pie to beam. Celestia shifted her attention to Shane. “So, baked goods and meat? You have a strange diet. What else do humans eat?”

He shrugged again. “Fruits, vegetables, grains, pizza, pasta, popsicles, you name it, and there’s a good chance there’s a human that eats it.”

“Well, I’m afraid our pantry is a bit lacking in the meat department. But if you’d like, we would be honored if you would join us for dinner this evening,” she finished diplomatically.

He held out his bandaged arms to either side. “Eh, why not? It isn’t like I had something better planned.”

“Wonderful. It will also give you a chance to get out of this *cell*. We’ll have you moved to another room up in the castle as soon as I can make the arrangements.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“I’m not staying here?”

“Of course not. This is a *jail cell*. Why? Did you *want* to stay here?”

He shrugged yet again. “I’ve stayed in worse places than this. It’s dry, it’s warm, thick walls, natural choke point, flank security. It suits me just fine. Besides I figure I’m out of the way down here. And judging by the gross amounts of guards and secrecy, I take it my existence is still largely a secret. What happens when some random civvy sees me wandering the halls?”

“You’ve puzzled out the situation quite well,” she said amused.

“I didn’t make it this far in life on my good looks alone.”

Celestia chuckled. “Equestria is home to many a strange species. So

long as you stay in the castle and out of the spotlight, I doubt there would be any serious problems. But you are correct, I'd like to keep you away from the general population for as long as possible, at least until I can address the issue publicly. But that does not mean have to remain cramped in a dungeon cell. This castle has been here a very long time. There are corridors and passages that have remained unused for years. We will have no trouble keeping you out of sight."

He held up his hands to indicate his innocence in the scheme, "Alright. It's your party. But if an angry mob kicks in the castle doors with torches and pitchforks, I'm blaming you," he warned. He let out another expansive yawn.

"You *are* tired aren't you?" Celestia noticed.

"I didn't sleep," he explained.

"Well then how about this; Luna and I have several things that require our attention. We'll leave you to rest for a few hours, then come collect you when it's time for dinner. Afterwards we can give you a tour of the castle," she offered.

He grinned, "It's a date," he teased, earning a laugh from Luna and the girls.

Celestia chuckled as well. "Very well then. Come on girls, let the Major get some rest."

The girls looked slightly disappointed, but did as they were told and began to file out of the cell.

Before Pinkie Pie exited she turned and waved goodbye, "Nighty night, don't let the parasprites bite!" She stopped in her tracks right in front of the door, as if some great revelation had struck her. "Wait. It's not nighttime! But I can't say 'day-ee day' that wouldn't make sense. How can you wish somepony a good night if it's day? Well I suppose you could..." she continued to ramble to herself until Rainbow Dash poked her head back inside and grabbed the pony's fluffy pink tail and began to doggedly drag the young mare out of the room. Pinkie Pie continued to ramble even as she was



being towed away.

Eventually the only one that remained was Luna, who had stayed seated as the others left.

She shifted uncomfortably for a second. "I'm sorry to bring down the room," she began somberly, "but I need to know what you want done with... *their* remains." Luna nodded towards the cot.

The slight amounts of happiness drained from his face. He looked downward at the cot he was sitting on for a moment. He bent down and snaked a hand underneath and pulled out the bundle that protected the tags of the crew.

He held the bundle in his hands and stared at it for a moment. "Can I see them?" he asked in a voice hardly above a whisper.

"Are you sure?" Luna posed, knowing that would not be an easy thing to see.

He nodded.

"Very well. We can go tomorrow, if you wish."

He nodded again.

Luna stood and prepared to exit the room. She regarded him for a moment. "Rest well, Major." Luna made her way toward the door. She stopped about halfway and turned, "Try not to fall prey to the demons of the past. It is a lesson I have had to learn many times."

He looked up from his bundle to Luna. She offered him a weak smile. He did his best to return it, one corner of his mouth lifted pitifully, then fell back down into the permanent mask he seemed to wear. Luna turned and stepped out of the cell, the door sealed shut behind her, leaving the human alone in the permanent quiet that ruled inside the tiny cell. The padding on the walls and floor muffled any vibration causing an unearthly silence.

He slowly untied the sleeves and unfolded the bundle. The cluster of silver chains rested safely in the center, piled together, he deftly worked to untangle the lengths of silver. He read each tag as it

passed through his hands, each tag bore a name, each name bore significance. Memories, good and bad, happy and sad, many were a strange combination of the four.

He laid the tags back down on the blouse, and once again, began to fold it up, sealing in the tags in the protective multicam fabric. He tied the sleeves together, ensuring the bundle would not fall apart.

He held it in his hands for a moment. He closed his eyes, and pressed the bundle to his forehead.

“...I’m sorry,” he breathed. “I’ll see you again.”

He tucked the bundle under his cot and lay down upon the canvas. He rested his head upon the pillow, and closed his eyes, falling into fitful sleep.

~~~~~

# ARTICLE 2 Part VII

## ARTICLE 2

### Part VII

By: Muppetz (!Gsih3Wfnlk)

~~~~~

Twilight had to crane her neck slightly to see through the tiny rectangular port hole on the large steel door. With one large violet eye, she peeked inside.

The human lay on his cot, but Twilight couldn't say for certain whether or not he was actually asleep. He was lying on his stomach. His pillow had been knocked to the floor, his back rose and fell rhythmically, but he otherwise displayed no signs of consciousness.

Luna pushed her face up next to Twilight to get a view for herself. "Is he asleep?" she whispered curiously.

"I think so, it's hard to tell." Twilight whispered back.

A few hours had passed since their last meeting with the human. After Luna shared some of the revelations she gleaned, Twilight scoured the libraries for any record of human kind. She combed the volumes, paging through everything from histories to mythologies, biographies to encyclopedias, yet she found no mention of the cryptic species.

This omission worried Twilight, especially since the Canterlot Royal Archives were among the most extensive in all of Equestria. If any record or allusion existed, it would be here. Despite her failures, Twilight clung to the possibility that somewhere some lore or legend would make mention of "humanity".

"Well, there's one way to find out," Luna said, snapping Twilight back into the present.

Luna's horn glowed as she unwound the enchantments that locked the door. The sonorous grinding that usually accompanied the deadbolts sliding out of place was noticeably absent; perhaps the princess was magically muffling the sound to avoid waking the human. Or perhaps she had merely neglected to bother using them the last time she sealed the door.

Twilight sincerely hoped it was the latter. For some reason sneaking up on this human while it slept seemed like a terrible idea.

The door sluggishly swung inward. Luna nudged it impatiently and slipped inside. Twilight followed close behind.

If the human *was* awake, his figure didn't betray it. His face was buried in the crook of his elbows, which were folded neatly under his head. The toes of his boots hung over the edge of his cot, which placed him over six feet tall. This, coupled with his almost two hundred pound frame and, admittedly, rather *imposing* presence in the room did nothing to instill confidence in their current reanimatory aspirations.

"Alright... how do we go about doing this?" Luna wondered in a hushed tone.

"Preferably... with a very long stick, and from a safe distance," Twilight answered, perfectly serious.

"We don't have one of those," Luna replied. She stepped further into the room, **bravely** approaching the sleeping human. Twilight hesitated to get so close.

"Major?" Luna began rather quietly, he did not stir in the slightest. "Major," Luna repeated a bit more loudly to no avail. She tentatively lifted a hoof and as gently as possible, nudged his shoulder. "Shane," Luna repeated in a tone slightly louder than speaking. She nudged just enough to gently rock the human.

Quicker than Twilight could catch, his left arm swung out and slapped away Luna's hoof. He lazily swiveled his head to identify his antagonist.

His head recoiled as if stung. He jerked around, eyes wide, and pressed against the far wall. He balled up his fists defensively.

Luna immediately held up a wing to shield the young purple mare at her side and slowly backed away submissively.

He pressed against the far wall blinking like an owl for several seconds before recognition entered his countenance. His fists fell limply to the cot as the memory rushed back to him. Several choice swear words wafted into the air, while he ran a hand through his cropped mane.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. Are you alright?" Luna asked cautiously.

"No," he replied brusquely.

"What's wrong?" she probed further.

He closed his eyes and rubbed his face with the palms of his hands. His arms slumped down to either side. "I'm still *here*," he explained distastefully while staring angrily at the ceiling.

"Ah, I'll try not to take that personally," Luna said amused.

"Don't try too hard," he retorted disdainfully.

Luna chuckled at his delightfully caustic mannerisms. Twilight on the other hoof found his casual cruelty all too fascinating. She figured that most obvious explanation was it was a defense mechanism of sorts, but she couldn't say for certain. She secretly wished for another human to compare his behaviors against, but for the moment, she decided one was more than enough to handle.

"If you're still feeling up to it, dinner is waiting."

It took him a moment to recall his agreement to dine with the alicorns. He ran his hands through his cropped mane once more, then snaked an arm under the cot, producing his marpat blouse which was still tied in a neat bundle. He fingered loose the knotted sleeves, grabbed a fistful of the chains, and deposited them in the large pocket near his right knee.

He sat for a moment, pensively staring at the floor. His reverie did not last long however and soon he pursed his lips and pulled on the blouse, carefully sliding his bandaged arms through the sleeves, then stood and began buttoning the blouse.

He tried brushing a few wrinkles out with little success and eventually gave up. He eyed the ponies. "I'm assuming you two are my escorts then?"

Luna and Twilight nodded happily.

"So how does this work?" he asked, genuinely confused.

"Well, usually it entails you following us to a room *other* than a prison cell, where we proceed eat to food."

"Hmm. What are the odds they'll be serving steak?"

"Slim to none."

"Figures." He motioned toward the door. "Lead the way."

Luna beamed a happy smile, and motioned to Twilight, who slipped back out the door and into the dark hallway. She nodded encouragingly at Shane who remained hesitantly in his cell.

His first few steps out were halting and uncertain. He rolled his shoulders and took a deep breath as he exited.

The guards eyed him suspiciously; he hadn't exactly established a stellar reputation with them. Several armored stallions were prepared to shepherd them to the castle.

Their commander sternly approached Twilight and produced a set of gleaming silver shackles.

Shane looked down at the hoof cuffs and then back up at Aegis with an unseemly grin, "Presumptuous aren't we?"

Aegis was not as amused.

Luna trotted up, "Those won't be necessary, Commander."

Shane turned to Luna still smirking, “You’re supposed to buy me dinner *before* you bust out the hand-cuffs.”

“Very cute,” Luna chided sarcastically.

Twilight suppressed a grin.

“Highness?” Aegis questioned.

Luna looked over at the commander reassuringly, “Don’t worry, Commander. He isn’t going to cause any trouble. *Are you?*” she directed the last part toward Shane.

“Don’t give me a reason to,” he retorted.

Aegis did not appreciate the response. Twilight did her best to give him a confident smile, but that only served to deepen his frown.

“Let’s go, Celestia is waiting on us.” Luna prodded, taking the initiative to lead the group.

Shane took one last look at Aegis, sporting a strange grin. “Sorry, chief. If it makes you feel better I wouldn’t trust me either. Better luck next time.”

Aegis cocked an eyebrow at the human, clearly not a fan of the term ‘*chief*’.

The human turned and followed Luna down the hallway. Twilight had to trot for a few seconds to catch up to the pair. Several guards had already taken up their positions around the group. Luna leading the way Twilight found a spot walking next to the human.

He looked down to the smiling purple filly, seemingly puzzled by her proximity but he did not otherwise protest, choosing instead to absorb the details of his surroundings. He routinely glanced over his shoulder at the guards bringing up the rear. It struck Twilight as a tad paranoid, but she imagined that if she were in his position she might be a bit on edge as well.

One final turn led to a long hallway ending in a set of large ominous black doors. Luna’s horn flashed and the doors swung

open, ushering in a torrent of dusky orange sunlight.

~~~~~

Everything was prepared. They appropriated one of the smaller dining rooms; the main banquet hall was far too large, **had** too many windows, **and was** much too conspicuous.

Celestia obviously could not have servants running to and fro during the meal, so she had prepared everything needed in advance. Every course was on the table. She made certain to have a wide variety of foods present, to allow the human to choose for himself what to eat. Upon Pinkie Pie's encouragement, Celestia also arranged to present an impressive array of baked goods. That is... if Pinkie didn't burn her way through them first.

Twilight and Luna left to fetch the human almost half an hour ago. Celestia was tempted to worry about the two, but she reminded herself that they could not risk an attempt to teleport the human. And the walk from the dungeons to the room would take time, especially if they detoured through side passages to avoid the general public. Most ponies would not likely be wandering the castle this time of day, it was late, and most had already gone home to be with their families. But some were sure to still be lingering about.

The other five ponies busily entertained themselves. Pinkie Pie was devouring any edible matter within arm's reach. Fluttershy sat politely listening to Rarity gab about some noteworthy pony she had encountered. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were busy doing what they always did; arguing.

Celestia enjoyed watching the group; they never failed to make her smile. *Ode to the antics of the young.* Celestia's horn began to glitter with a gold aura and a small porcelain kettle followed suit as it lifted into the air and tilted. A small stream of tea shot from the spout, collecting in a delicate teacup.

Celestia sipped at the concoction demurely, awaiting the return of her sister.



~~~~~

“This is the most architecturally irresponsible structure I have ever seen in my life,” Shane complained to Luna whilst they made their way through the castle. “You walk like... twenty clicks in *ANY* direction, and you’ll hit perfectly flat stable ground, but noooo, you pick the side of a friggin’ cliff.” He cautiously peeked over the edge of a banister and looked down the long drop to the valley below.

“Shane... are you afraid of heights?” Twilight taunted playfully.

“No, I’m afraid of precariously perched castles crashing down around my head and burying me alive.”

Luna chuckled, “This castle has been here for well over a thousand years. It isn’t about to *collapse*, I promise.”

“Oh, *great*. So the castle is teetering on a cliff *AND* ancient. That’s terrific. I feel much better.” He laid the sarcasm so thick it could be cut with a butter knife.

“Come on, we need to get moving. We’re late enough already,” Luna urged.

With one last look off the edge of the balcony Shane and Twilight retook their places in the formation and continued to follow the midnight blue alicorn, deeper into the castle.

Twilight knew the passages and corridors could seem monotonous and confusing to some; she had spent a great deal of her younger years in the castle and even she still became confused at times.

She looked at the human. He did not seem overly concerned, but he continued ritually swiveling his head back and forth, occasionally craning his neck to check on the guards at his back.

It took him a while, but he finally seemed to accept Twilight’s company. He even sporadically leaned down to ask her something; mostly questions about the castle or some statue or piece of art adorning the halls. Twilight answered as best she could, but not every statue or figurine held some significance to pony culture. Twilight explained that most were merely decorative.

They walked down another abandoned corridor where sets of oak doors occasionally interrupted the monotonous polished marble.

As Luna passed another unassuming set of doors, their handles glowed a soft pink and opened from the other side through some incredible stroke of bad luck. The sheer improbability that the unseen spell-caster would come through those doors *right* at that moment boggled Twilight's mind.

The human stopped in his tracks. Guards already moved to subdue either the intruder or the human should it prove necessary. Luna spun around in shock, like a filly that had been caught pilfering cookies.

A smallish dark pink unicorn trotted casually out into the hallway, nose buried deep in a yellow folder full of legal documents. The mare was clearly oblivious to all the anxious eyes following her.

She collided face first into the humans side, knocking her back on her haunches, and sending papers scattering everywhere. She landed on her rump, dazed by the sudden impact. She fumbled to adjust the set of small framed glasses resting on her little pink nose, and began to stammer out an apology, before looking up at the bruised and bloody human, towering over her. She paled to a ghostly level, her irises shrinking to pinprick size.

Given his history, Shane took to the intrusion rather well. Twilight figured he didn't consider the tiny mare a threat, or maybe he just wasn't in attack mode at the moment.

He regarded the petrified mare at his feet for several seconds. Finally he knelt down and sat on his heels, balancing on his toes. "Boo."

The poor pink filly's face drained of any last vestiges of color, and without even a second thought she spun around and bolted away at a full gallop, leaving every wafting scrap of paper behind.

"Really?" Twilight panned, despite Shane's obvious delight.

"Lighten up. I'm having fun," he defended, still chuckling.

“You have a strange concept of fun,” Luna said in a chiding voice as she approached.

One of the guards stepped forward. “Should we go after her, ma’am?”

“No. I doubt one pony is capable of inciting mass panic. However, try and find out who she was and at least make sure she’s alright, and that she isn’t hiding in a closet suffering a heart attack.” She shot a disapproving glare at Shane.

“Don’t give me that look. It was funny and you know it. Thank me later.”

Luna found his justificatory logic unsatisfying. She shook her head, not willing to get into another argument about it. “Come on, we need to keep moving.” Luna turned and retook her place at the forefront of the procession. They approached a long flight of stairs followed by a few more hallways.

“How does she know where she’s going? Everything looks the same,” he said to Twilight in a hushed tone.

“It’s confusing at first. You get used to it.”

“Is that so?” he said in a flat voice.

“Mmm hmm. I grew up here, you know,” she offered, hoping maybe that if she offered some insight into her own life, he might open up as well.

“Lucky you,” he quipped distractedly, once again quashing Twilight’s hopes; apparently it would take more than idle banter to break him out of his cynical shell.

The hallway lead to a larger central passageway where all the corridors intersected. Luna held up a hoof, halting the group. She craned her head around the corner, looking both ways for any potential witnesses. She beckoned with another wave of the hoof and proceed to walk down the hallway, albeit at a brisker pace.

Twilight rounded the corner, stepping out onto vibrant red carpet,

which accented white and gold marble. The hallway was vacant, save two ponies walking in the opposite direction. They were a fair clip away and didn't bother turning around to identify the hoof falls of the group.

The procession walked down the exposed passageway for a few hundred feet before ducking into another, short hallway. This one leading to a set of doors marked with gold placards.

Before proceeding through the doors, Luna turned and addressed the guards. Four were to accompany them inside, the rest were to stand outside and try to look inconspicuous. How exactly eight armored guards were supposed to accomplish this, Twilight had no idea, but they sounded their compliance with zeal nonetheless.

Then Luna turned on Shane. "Do we remember the rules?" she asked patronizingly.

He gave Luna a flat, angry stare.

"Splendid," she said beaming. "Let's go then." Luna closed the remaining gap between the doors. She placed one gilded hoof on the doors and gave a light push, and they glided open.

~~~~~

"Are you making this up?" Applejack inquired incredulously.

"No it's totally true. Pegasi can be either left or right winged," Dash explained again.

"That don't make a lick a sense. If they're always flappin in sync how can one be dominant? If ya favored one wing over tha other wouldn't ya tend ta... tilt?"

"It's not like the dominant wing is more powerful or something. It's just kinda like... they'll tend to use their right or left wing more, or they'll bank left more than right. It's a bit more subtle than being right or left hooved, but it's still totally true."

"Fluttershy, is she making this up?"

“Oh... um... well... no, she is right. We went over it in flight school. I never really favored one wing over the other, but I have heard that some pegasi do.”

Celestia polished off a second cup of tea. Luna would arrive any moment. Celestia sat demurely at the table, patiently waiting and watching. She defined composure. Still, she would be lying if she said she wasn't a bit nervous. This was possibly their last chance to repair the damage done the past few days.

For countless sleepless nights Celestia and her sister had slaved to ensure the continued prosperity of the ponies they loved so much. So much work, so much care and so much love went into the vision that was Equestria. They had done well too; Equestria had flourished under their vigil. It was not perfect, nothing ever is, but it was likely as close to perfection as they could get.

But this human jeopardized everything. Granted it was through no fault of his own, but still, he threatened all they had worked for. Regardless of his intentions, his very presence could easily destabilize the entire nation.

The easy solution would have been to simply let him die so that this whole situation could be neatly swept under the rug. But she found such an avenue repugnant and rejected it entirely. No, their decision had already been made, and there was no going back on it now.

The road ahead was foggy. Even she could not predict what the future held, but what was clear, is that none of the paths ahead would be easy. Although, she had to admit it was becoming increasingly difficult to prewise a happy ending from this mess. If any such hope existed, it depended heavily on this human's full cooperation. Which is partially why this dinner was so important. They needed him on their side.

Celestia's ears perked as she heard the inconspicuous sound armored hooves outside the door. Each of the girls also fell quiet as they glued their eyes to the door on the far end of the room.

“Remember girls,” Celestia began, “we need him to like us, so be

polite.”

The door swung open, and from the dimly lit passage strode a very proud looking Luna. The two guards at her sides took up stations on either side of the door. Luna made her way into the room and Shane followed her inside hesitantly. He took the time to eye the door frame before stepping through and examining the room.

He scanned over the collection of ponies until he spied Fluttershy. He stared at the pegasus for a brief second, before turning around and walking back out the door.

“Hey!” Twilight shouted before clamping his shirt tail in her teeth. Her hooves found no grip on the smooth floor, and she was dragged out into the hallway. The door closed behind the two with a soft click.

“*Okay, not the best start,*” Celestia panned to herself.

Luna sat down at the table next to her sister before losing her smug smile and looking about curiously, “Where’d he go?”

Celestia nodded subtly toward Fluttershy, and comprehension filled Luna’s eyes. Celestia wondered if it were even possible for the yellow pegasus to sink into her own mane any further. The poor girl had clearly caught the message, and the look on her face made Celestia’s heart ache.

“Should... Should I leave?” Fluttershy squeaked out, clearly holding back tears.

“No, my dear,” Celestia replied as calmly and assuringly as she could, “I want you to stay here. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“She *kinda* di-”

Applejack stuffed a hoof in Rainbow Dash’s mouth.

“He’ll come around, I promise. It’s just going to take some time. I imagine he isn’t in a very happy place right now. We just need to be patient.”

Fluttershy appeared unconvinced, but she had not yet broken into tears. Celestia took that as a good sign.

~ ~ ~

Twilight clamped the tails of his blouse tightly between her teeth, and she was not about to let him go. He had no trouble dragging her plot along. His rubber-soled boots gave him better traction on the polished marble.

He made it almost halfway down the hallway before the guards massed and blocked his path. Their expressions made it clear he would not leave so easily.

He stopped, trapped between the guards and double doors leading back to Fluttershy. Twilight released his shirt.

Once Twilight had caught her breath she began, "Alright look, we can't do this every time you and Fluttershy are in the same room."

"I agree. I propose we never be in the same room."

"That's *not* what I meant," Twilight said annoyed. "Fluttershy is the kindest pony in Equestria! Why won't you give her a chance?" Twilight pleaded.

He didn't say anything, staring at the wall with his arms crossed, his bottom jaw jutting out like a pouting child.

"I mean she bandaged your arms for you didn't she?"

"Oh *yeah*, 'Here are some band-aids, hope this makes up for that *mind rape* from earlier,'" he mocked.

Twilight circled around to his front to force him to meet her gaze. Unfortunately he stood much taller than her. It was difficult to grab someone's eyes when yours only reached their stomach. She looked up at the human, who was indignantly staring above the purple mare. "Shane," Twilight tried. He still refused to look at her. "**Shane!**" Twilight said a little more forcefully.

His eyes flicked down to her.

She furrowed her brow and pointed a hoof down at the floor.

He looked down and cocked his head with a 'you've got to be kidding' look.

Twilight deepened her scowl and pointed aggressively at the floor.

He rolled his eyes and sighed, annoyed. He lowered himself to Twilight's level, and sat on his heels.

Twilight's frustration relented and she spoke in a hushed tone, "Look, I don't care whether you believe me or not, but that pony in there wants nothing more than to help you."

"I'm not entirely sure how much more of your '*help*' I can take." He intuitively responded in a discrete tone.

"She did that to protect you, whether you want to believe it or not. If she hadn't stopped you, the princess would have put you down, and even if she didn't the guards *would* have. With the way you were acting, I say you got a very lucky draw."

He chewed on the inside of his cheek, looking away. Twilight was right and he knew it.

Twilight was on a roll. "I understand your trepidation, I do. What she did was wrong. But at the time it was the lesser of two evils. She did what she thought was best at the time just as you would have. She isn't going to use the stare again, I promise. She hated having to use it in the first place. Now I'm not asking you to kiss and make up, just... stop being so horrible to her. She already feels terrible and all she wants is your forgiveness. If you aren't ready to give that yet, fine. But at least *try*."

He fidgeted apprehensively. "Fine," he eventually let out, sounding none too happy about it. "But I don't want her looking at me," he stipulated, "that's how she gets you."

Twilight smiled proudly, but he elected not to return the gesture. "Thank you, now come on." Twilight led Shane back into the room. This time no one was dragged.



“Is everything alright?” Luna asked tentatively.

Twilight looked back to Shane.

“As *alright* as it going to get,” he sighed.

Luna beamed, once again mesmerized by Twilight’s lecturing power.

Celestia smiled as well. “Have a seat, Major.” She indicated the chair directly to her right.

Shane appeared apprehensive but walked over to the snow white alicorn. He sat down.

“Please, help yourself,” Celestia encouraged.

Twilight sat in the seat on his other side. She beheld the veritable feast the Princesses had arranged, and her stomach grumbled hungrily. However starved she felt, she was unsure if she should begin eating. She was wholly unfamiliar with human dining customs.

Everypony else shared her uncertainty, so the entire party stared at the human to see what he’d do. Unfortunately he seemed to be doing the same. Both sides waited for the other to make the first move in an awkward stalemate.

The human looked down at the selection of food. An ornate salad with a raspberry dressing was the foremost dish. There was an identical salad at every place at the table.

The human gingerly picked out a bright red cherry tomato. Everypony watched him intently, but instead of eating the tiny fruit, as they all expected, he carefully placed the tomato squarely on a nearby silver spoon. He finally looked around the room at all the curious mares.

He tried to seem as nonchalant as possible when he pounded a fist on the opposite side of the spoon, catapulting the small tomato in a high arc above the table.

Everypony's eyes tracked the small fruit through the air. Shane quickly made use of the distraction to switch plates with the purple mare next to him.

"*How sneaky*," Celestia thought, amused as she pretended not to notice.

The tomato collided with the wall with a pathetic little splat, and fell to the floor. Everyone turned back to the human who was grinning victoriously.

"Um... what was that for?" Dash dared to ask, confused.

He shrugged, still grinning. "Icebreaker?"

Celestia chuckled.

Shane inspected his tiny collection of silverware: all spoons. He picked one up and dipped it in his salad bowl. Lifting it, almost every piece of lettuce fell off and back into the bowl. "I think a fork might be slightly better suited for this particular meal."

"I'm trying to avoid giving you pointy things," Celestia teased.

He grinned devilishly, "Oh good. You're learning." He abandoned his spoon and picked up a leaf with his fingers and placed it in his mouth. He chewed it for a bit before swallowing, "Alright, that's pretty good."

The group breathed a collective sigh of relief as they too began helping themselves to their food.

"So Major," Rarity finally spoke, "if I may ask; who designed your... uh... *ensemble*?" she spoke with a subtle overtone of disapproval.

The human snorted and looked down at himself. "I don't know... the DoD?"

"Ah... I see." She sounded disappointed.

He laughed again. "Aw, she doesn't like my cammies." he joked.

“No no no,” she rushed to amend, “they’re... *lovely*. It’s just they are a bit... unusual. Is that a common dress among humans?”

“Among my kinds of humans, yeah. It’s a military uniform.”

“Military huh?” Dash interjected. “You ever go to war?”

“Dash,” Twilight scolded.

“Twice,” the human responded casually.

“You ever kill anypony?”

“DASH!” Twilight sounded horrified.

The human still didn’t look offended; the question seemed to amuse him.

“I’m just making conversation,” Dash defended.

“We ran into a bit of a snag on the way up,” Luna started, eager to change the subject.

Celestia turned to her sister, alarmed. “How bad?”

“A young mare I didn’t recognize bumped into us. The Major was kind enough to send her running in terror before we could get a chance to talk to her.” She cast an angry glance at Shane. He was busy snickering through a mouthful of salad.

“It was pretty funny though,” he defended between bites.

“Is it going to be a problem?” Celestia asked, ignoring him.

“I don’t think so. The testimony of one pony is hardly enough to incite panic, but it’s something to keep an eye on just in case.”

“I feel obligated to point out that you wouldn’t have to keep your eyes on anything had you simply let my ass die,” Shane panned. He sniffed the clear liquid in the glass in front of him, took a tentative sip, and identified it as water. He took a few more sips.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Celestia mock-apologized.

“Why did you do it?” he asked in a serious tone.

“Do what?”

“Save me.”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” she said teasingly while dipping a small biscuit in her tea.

“I just don’t see what you get out of this.”

“Answers, Major. We get answers, and a dead man gives us none. You are simply going to have to trust that we do not harbor any malicious intent.”

“What if I don’t?”

“Then we will sit here, at an impasse, until one of us turns to dust. Are all humans so incredulous?”

“It’s come to be my understanding, that if something sounds too good to be true, it is. I’m still trying to figure out why I’m not on a table being dissected.”

“You seem awfully keen about this dissection thing,” Luna noted.

“To be perfectly honest, had *you* landed on *my* planet, they would have chopped your ass up faster than you could say ‘*Take me to your leader*’.” Luna’s expression must have given him pause because he added, “... nothing personal, but when *humans* want answers, they tend to ask pretty hard.”

“Humans sound barbaric,” Rarity declared, as if one weren’t sitting across the table.

Shane smiled cheekily, “Oh I don’t know about that, *barbaric* is such an... opprobrious word. I prefer to think of it as... *aggressive curiosity*. Besides, barbarism is relative.”

“There is something *I* still don’t understand,” Twilight breached the growing silence. “How exactly did you come to learn Equestrian?”

The human finished chewing. "I didn't. I'm speaking English. Apparently it's the same, or at least similar enough, as whatever you're speaking."

"Does that not seem odd to you though?"

"Kid, I just crash landed in a parallel dimension of talking magic ponies. *Nothing* seems odd to me at this point."

"It just doesn't make sense," she struggled.

He shrugged, "Get used to it. I have the distinct feeling that 'sense' is quickly becoming an infrequent occurrence. "

The answer, or lack thereof, was highly unsatisfying.

Shane looked around the room. "So, I have a question." Everypony looked up curiously. "What is the annual budget in Equestria for hair dye? It's gotta be outrageous. Especially for Rainbow Sprinkles over there," he pointed at Dash.

"It's *Dash!* And I *don't* dye my mane!" she defended, offended not only at the accusation but also that the human hadn't remembered her name.

Applejack chuckled soundly.

"It actually *grows in* all... rainbow-ey?" He sounded skeptical.

"*Yeah!*" she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "You can't fake awesomeness on this scale." She brushed a hoof through her prismatic mane, and struck a pose. "I mean I *AM* the fastest, most talented, and all around awesome-est pony that ever existed. So naturally my mane would have to reflect that."

Shane cocked an eyebrow.

Applejack chuckled louder, "Don't ya'll worry none. She get's to be a might bit less irksome once ya get ta know her."

Dash shot AJ a venomous look.

“... can’t wait,” Shane replied sarcastically. He popped the last bite of salad into his mouth. Something flicked across the corner of his eye and grabbed his attention: Celestia’s incorporeal mane. He watched Celestia’s wavy hair for several minutes. The ethereal mane blew towards him in some nonexistent breeze.

Without asking permission, he brazenly reached up and swished a hand through the vaporous coiffure. It reacted like a mane underwater. His hand did not pass through the gossamer threads, instead they flowed around it, apparently unlettered in the laws of gravity.

Celestia noticed the human. Twilight feared the princess would be angry with him for daring to touch the royal hairdo, but she wasn’t. In fact, it amused her greatly. She smiled like somepony watching a kitten play with a strand of yarn.

“Why does it do that?” he finally asked.

“The wavy thing?”

“Yeah.” By this point he had graduated from hand swooshing to full on arm flailing, attempting to impose some manner of reason upon the magical filaments.

“I like the wavy thing,” Celestia justified with a hint of witticism.

He finally managed to seize a lock of her billowing mane. He inspected the captured strands up close, seeing that her flowing locks indeed comprised of individual hairs. The slender and delicate gossamer strands blended when clumped together.

Celestia winced as he plucked out a strand of hair. Her guards immediately moved in to detain the human. They halted when Celestia held up a hoof and gestured them back to their posts.

Shane was oblivious, fascinated by the stolen strand. He held one end aloft to see if it would wave all on its own. He swished it a bit, attempting to jumpstart it to life. The stubborn strand, however, showed no sign of life. Highly dissatisfied, he discarded the long pink thread.

He leaned forward, turning toward Luna. “Why isn’t yours all wavy?”

Luna smiled and shook her silvery blue mane. The roots of the slender blue locks slowly changed, transforming before their eyes into the astral blue cloud that she often wore during special occasions. Soon her mane became a billowing, glittering representation of the night sky.

Shane’s jaw hung open. He even let out a soft “ooooh,” clearly amazed by the ethereal display. He wasn’t alone, the girls were also enraptured by the show; even Pinkie Pie had ceased devouring her hoard of various deserts.

Luna stuck her chin in the air haughtily, proud of the attention.

“Show-off,” Celestia teased under her breath.

“Green is an ugly color on you, dearest sister.” Shane found her response immensely entertaining.

Twilight hid a smile behind a purple hoof, unsure if she should openly show her mirth, after all, it *was* at the expense of a Princess.

Celestia however cracked a smile and laughed along, absolving the rest of the room to join in.

Luna stood, prompting the girls to do the same.

Shane continued to sit, looking around rapidly, realizing he had missed something.

Luna strode toward the door. She paused at the window for a moment, examining the sky as if searching for rainclouds. “If you will all excuse me for a brief moment. I must attend to my night.”

She finally exited through the door, leaving them behind. The girls retook their seats.

“... She’s attending who?” Shane asked, befuddled.

“OH yeah!” Pinkie Pie burst, before anypony could answer him. “I

almost forgot to ask you. What does your cutie mark mean?”

The room turned to him, fascinated to hear how the human had earned his cutie mark, and also possibly learn his special talent.

“My what?”

“Your cutie mark!” Pinkie reasserted.

“What the hell is a *cutie mark*?” He was genuinely puzzled.

Now the girls were confused. Sure, there were species that did not share in the cutie mark heritage that ponies enjoyed. But he *had* a cutie mark. They had seen it. How could he not know of his own mark?

“You know... your cutie mark,” Rainbow tried to assist but she was struggling to find the right words to explain it.

“Duh, silly, your cutie mark! See?” Pinkie hopped her front hooves down onto the floor while leaving her rear hoofs up on the seat. The position left her rear sticking in the air. She pointed a hoof back to her flank at a trio of balloons. “This one is mine,” she stated obviously, before hopping back up onto her seat. “We saw yours while you were sleeping. It was *totally* in the wrong spot. It matches the picture on your shirt.” She gasped. “Is your talent bird watching?!”

He looked down at his blouse and the EGA stitched onto the left breast pocket. A glimmer of uncertain comprehension entered his eye. He pointed to his shoulder, directly in the center of the deltoid. “This?”

They nodded.

He chuckled, shrugging off the cammie blouse. His formerly clean bandages had several fresh crimson bloodstains, immediately setting off Fluttershy’s warning bells.

He gingerly peeled back the top layer of bandaging, revealing the dark blue mark. It was almost black. It depicted an eagle spreading its wings over a globe, superimposed over a slanted anchor. The



eagle clutched a fluttering banner in its jaws. On it was written; SEMPER FIDELIS, in bold lettering. “That?” he pointed.

They nodded an affirmation.

He laughed at their ignorance. “It’s a tattoo.”

“Is that what humans call cutie marks?”

“Why do you keep saying that? No, *taaattoo*. The fuck is a cutie mark?”

“A cutie mark is the picture that appears on the flank of little fillies and colts when they discover their special talent,” Twilight tried to explain.

“They just *appear*?” he sounded skeptical.

“Mmm hmmm,” the group assured.

“How?”

“Magic,” Twilight disclosed simply.

He rolled his eyes. “Why do I get the feeling that is going to be the answer to anything you don’t feel like explaining?”

“So what does it meeeaaann?!” Pinkie Pie persisted.

He seemed confused by the question, “It’s just a tattoo, it the Eagle Globe and Anchor, it’s the Marine Corps symbol. It didn’t *appear*. I had to pay to get this done.”

“You... *paid* for your cutie mark?” Dash asked.

“It’s not a cutie mark! Stop calling it that! It’s a tattoo. I paid some guy to do this. They use a machine that shoots a needle into your skin and leaves a tiny bit of ink.”

The girls looked horrified; why anypony would willingly undergo such an awful sounding procedure was beyond them.

“That’s appalling! Why would you ever *pay* for such a beastly

thing?!” Rarity demanded.

He snickered while struggling back into his blouse. His arms apparently giving him some trouble. “Because moto tattoos seem like such a great idea right after boot.”

The explanation did nothing to clarify the situation.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” Twilight asked.

“Pfff. If you’re a total pussy.”

Again Twilight was amazed by the archaic behaviors of this... *advanced* species. She silently wondered how they managed to advance so far if they were all busy mutilating themselves for show.

She shook her head, berating herself for allowing her thoughts to become so close minded. This one human was no more a representative of his species than she was of hers. Besides, who was she to question another culture? She of all ponies should know better. It was exactly that obstinate view that led to conflict in the first place. She was reminded, somewhat painfully of her first encounter with Zecora.

The sun finally sank behind the edge of the world, plunging the land into abject darkness. The brief moment where neither the sun nor the moon graced the sky. It was not to last, however. The soft silvery glow of the crescent moon peaked over the horizon, bathing the valley in its ghostly shine.

The rise of the moon seemed a bit more abrupt than Celestia recalled. She secretly wondered if Luna rushed the job. She made a note to confront the younger Princess about it later.

With the discussion of the human’s perverse cutie mark behind them the group delved into more tame conversations, mostly Dash questioning his diet.

“So none of you have ever had meat?” he queried.

They shook their heads, looking a bit ill at the prospect, namely Fluttershy.

“But... then, how can you have any pudding?!”

They all stared at him confused, while he grinned like an eel.

“... No? ... Nothing?” he folded his arms and slouched a bit, “... *gay*. None of you are going to understand my hilariously witty jokes and references.”

“Did ponies eat meat where you come from?” Twilight asked, getting back on track.

“No, well... not really. I mean, they aren’t *supposed* to.”

“So they aren’t *suppose* to... but they do anyway?”

“Not necessarily. As far as I know horses eat hay and oats, that’s it. But, I mean I’m sure it happens. Some horses are bred to be able to digest meat, like in high altitude places where grass is scarce. So yes and no. They naturally eat plants, but there are always exceptions. Like, this one time I saw a horse pick a bird off the ground and just ate it. Like... no shit. It just... ate the thing, *alive*. It was brutal.”

Fluttershy was about to be sick. She had absolutely nothing against carnivores. It was the natural order of the world that everything ate everything else. But this was wholly aberrant. She had to forcibly remind herself that the human ponies were *not* normal ponies. They couldn’t be held responsible for their actions. But ... still. The thought made her stomach twist.

Luna chose then to stride back into the room, laden with her saddlebags and a devilish look in her eye. Celestia could have sworn she heard the bags clinking slightly, warranting an explanation.

Luna strode up and took her place at the table next to her sister. Looking very proud of herself. She pulled forth two sleek, burgundy bottles.

Celestia identified them as fairly rare vintages of Equestrian icewine.

“Booze!” the human cried ecstatically, practically bouncing in his chair.

“Absolutely not!” Celestia insisted, maternally.

“Come on, Celestia,” Luna started to argue. “I’ve been saving it for a special occasion.”

“Even if I thought giving *HIM* alcohol was in *ANY* way a good idea, I would still say no.” By this point Shane looked somewhat heartbroken. “He *JUST* woke from a coma, and with all the blood he’s lost I must admit I’m surprised he’s walking at all. Another time *perhaps*, but not now.”

Luna was a bit disappointed, but she had to admit Celestia had a point. Although the more sinister part of her *really* wanted to see how it would behave with alcohol in its system.

“But I neeed it!” he said attempting a swipe at the closest bottle.

Celestia managed to levitate it out of reach. “No you don’t.”

“Alcohol is good for humans!” he plied desperately, “It’s a *vital* part of the Marine Corps food pyramid.”

She wasn’t sure if he was teasing or not. “Your liver disagrees, Major.”

“How do you know what my liver likes? It’s *MY* liver.”

“I spent almost a week putting you back together. I know more about *you* than you do.” She fixed him with an authoritative stare. “No drinking.”

Shane slumped back down in his chair, looking thoroughly depressed. “Figures,” he deadpanned, “Right when I was considering starting to like you.”

Celestia ignored him. On the plus side, Luna had inadvertently stumbled upon yet another carrot that could be used on the human in lieu of the stick. Although ‘alcohol and sugar’ was hardly an arsenal of incentives, it was still more than the ‘nothing’ she had earlier this morning.

Pinkie trotted over with a large tray of cakes and pastries balanced

inexplicably on her back. “Aw don’t be sad. No pony is gonna be all grouch-erific while Pinkie Pie is around!” She twisted and arched her back, lifting to tray to offer the dessert.

He seemed to struggle for a moment. On one hoof, she knew the sugary treats were an veritable weak spot for him, but on the other, eating colorful pastries would directly conflict with the ‘angry human’ persona he had been so avidly clinging to. It is, in fact, rather difficult to look scary and mean whilst eating a cookie.

The battle was rather short lived, however. It was probably over before it began. He un-slouched a bit and selected a few baked goods for himself, doing his best not to smile while doing so. Although apparently that proved a bit too much as he cautiously took a bite of what looked like a brownie. His frown quickly melted away and sat chewing contentedly.

“Do you like it?” He nodded, making Pinkie beam enthusiastically

She began to bob up and down excitedly and began pushing ever increasing amounts of various desserts on the human. Of which he seemed all too accepting.

Twilight had to suppress the urge to tell Pinkie Pie to stop feeding the human junk food, hoping he possessed the capacity for self restraint before he made himself sick on the stuff.

“Poor thing, I can’t imagine living somewhere there’s no sugar!” Pinkie Pie pitied as she consumed several treats herself.

“We *have* sugar. It’s just expensive. I mean... why pay fifty times as much for real sugar when that synthetic kind ‘*tastes the same*’” he finished using air quotes which Twilight took to imply the synthetic sugar he spoke of did *not*, in fact, taste the same at all.

“Fake sugar?!” Pinkie questioned, horrified, “How do you *fake* sugar.”

He shrugged and did his best to describe the procedure required to chemically synthesize sugar. It was clear from the description he didn’t understand the process himself. A point which he made very

clear by replacing many descriptive words with swears.

Luna was all too fascinated by the brief insight into human society. Whether he intended to or not, he had once again revealed quite a bit about his species and culture than was directly stated. His tiny story revealed they were apparently able to chemically ‘replicate’ various materials, including foods and possessed the technologies capable of creating and globally distributing them. He mentioned expenses and monetary value meaning they shared a similar understanding of economics. He implied that they had the option to choose which product to buy indicating the presence of free market.

As much as they were learning about the human, Celestia couldn’t help but notice he seemed rather uninterested in asking any serious questions about the universe in which he was now stranded. Celestia asked him about his apparent lack of curiosity.

He shrugged. “I picked up the important stuff.”

Celestia cocked an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve only been conscious for... what... a day and a half? And most of that has been spent in a cell. What could you have possibly learned of Equestria?”

“Quite a lot. You just have to pay attention.”

“Do share,” Celestia encouraged.

He inhaled deeply, ensuring he would have plenty of breath a long tirade. “Alright, I suppose this had to happen sooner or later.” He cleared his throat. “You... *ponies* ... for the most part are actually fairly similar to humans. You eat, sleep, talk, feel, etcetera. You are clearly *capable* of harnessing modern technologies like electronics and complex machines but you seem to... *underutilize* them for reasons I am still somewhat unclear on but which is probably attributed to ‘*magic*’,” he used his air quotes again, “An excellent example; you have relatively advanced electric power grids, and have a rather successful array of hydroelectric facilities and yet

you-”

“Strange,” Luna interrupted, “I don’t recall mentioning our power grid.” Her tone slightly accusatory.

“We could see it from *orbit*. Scanners lit you up like a Christmas tree,” he panned, annoyed at having been interrupted, “Casual observation can speak volumes if you know how to look.”

“What exactly are you observing?” Luna prodded, somewhat patronizingly.

“Everything from the food on this table to color of the carpeting is telling me something about *you*. The *cell* itself, for example? The door was steel, not iron or bronze, steel. So let’s add metallurgy to your book of tricks. Consequently it’s safe to say you have some economic milieu in mining. The rivets that held it together looked like they were machined standard. Which tells me that you apparently have a factory somewhere that mass produces these rivets and therefore have the skilled laborers and machinery capable of doing so.

The equipment in the hospital room had several highly advanced electrical devices. Although since then I haven’t much in the ways of technology. But, again, I wasn’t accounting for... ‘*magic*,’” air quotes again, “so I’ll have to hammer *that* out later.

You left my sidearm *in the room* with me so you’re either overly trusting, to a dangerous degree, or you were merely ignorant of its purpose. Plus the fact that your boys are still rocking *plate armor* tells me you guys aren’t exactly leading the way in wartime technologies.”

As fascinating as this all was Luna found herself growing irritated by this human’s belittling critique.

“All leading me to the conclusion you all are apparently a rather... *peaceful* lot, possibly to a fault.”

“*Peace* a fault now?” Rarity challenged.

“In and of itself? No. But when it errs on the edge of stupidity, yes.”

he countered with a notable amount of bite in his voice. "This whole situation is a testament to that. Your failure to do what was necessary could have cost you a lot of lives."

"But it didn't," Luna said with a small smile.

"For all you *knew* I was going to wake up and go on a killing spree."

"And you didn't," Luna pointed.

"That's not the point," he said irritated. "You couldn't have known that. You had no idea what could have happened."

He was beginning to sound irritatingly similar to Aegis.

"What woulda happened is you would've gotten your flank stomped into the ground," Dash claimed hotly.

Luna interjected right as the human was about to make what was sure to be an equally heated offset. "It is usually at this point in the argument I would point out that we could spend an eternity fretting over what *could have been*. Dwelling in the past is a fruitless endeavor, Major. I would suggest you take leave of your own head for a moment, and instead try to focus your attention on what *has* happened. Relax knowing that we are all here, very much alive enough to have this lovely discussion. But if it puts your mind at ease then know this; we had no reason to suspect you would be hostile, nor did we wish to convey the wrong... *diplomatic* message by chaining you up like an animal." He grumbled slightly but did not otherwise interrupt. "Our hopes rested mainly on the fact that a species possessing such advanced technologies would be intelligent enough to see the folly in attacking the ponies that *saved his life*."

"... '*saved*'," he repeated to himself bitterly.

"And in a sense we were right. Granted, you were a bit... *stubborn* in coming to terms with it." Luna finished.

Celestia sat silently, deeply contemplative. It was several moments before she spoke again. "Major, I appreciate your concern for our safety but I assure you we are more capable then I think you give us credit for."



He snorted, dismissively. Celestia couldn't tell if it was out of irritation or amusement. He had an unusual habit of doing things without facially expressing the emotion that would normally accompany the action. It made deciphering his mood exceedingly difficult. "... try and stop me when I'm *not* playing nice and see what happens," he grouched to himself, defensively.

"... how was *that* 'playing nice'?" Twilight questioned dubiously.

"You're alive aren't you?" he answered wryly.

"Point taken," Twilight noted, eliciting a slightly proud grin from the human.

"You are a strange species," Luna summed up.

"You know nothing of my species," he pointed rather grimly.

"Well until you decide to start actually talking to us, you'll have to excuse the sweeping generalizations."

"Given my situation, I'd say I've been inordinately vocal."

"You speak readily enough, yes, but you do not say anything," Celestia curtailed.

He shook his head slightly as if the princess' Delphic phrasing were a fly buzzing about his head. "What?"

"When you reply to our questions you are cryptic, vague, you dance around the point or make cynical elusory digressions."

"You tend to ask for answers *I can't give*,"

"Can't or won't?"

"... both." He crossed his arms resolutely.

Celestia let out an exasperated sigh. "Major, we can not afford to continue playing this game. I take no joy in this, but sooner or later you will have to come to face the facts. You are *alone* now, Major. You are stranded here, whether you like it or not."

"I like how she says it like I don't already fucking *know that*," he murmured angrily to no pony in particular.

"I know, you know it," she established, "what I fail to understand is your lack of action on the matter. Your commitment to duty is impressive, commendable even. But you need to accept that things have changed. I'm sure you can appreciate that. This clearly isn't something your government accounted for when giving you orders. You have to realize that continuing on with this stubborn selfish act does nothing but make our situation go from bad to worse!"

"What do you want me to do?!" he cried, slashing a hand through the air. "You want me to just... *spill my guts* and start rattling off government secrets? You want me to show *you the mysteries of time and space*? Well here's a news-flash for you, princess; I DON'T KNOW THEM!"

Celestia hoped she hadn't pushed too far. The human seemed dangerously close to losing control.

"*I don't know* how I got here, and *I don't know* how to get back! But let me tell you what I do know. You're right, there is no... *general order* for this, but I have a pretty good idea what they'd tell me to do." He let that hang ominously in the air for a moment.

"What, exactly would that be?" she eventually dared ask.

He stared at her coldly for a few seconds. "To put a bullet in my head and deprive the enemy of valuable intelligence," he explained with frigid ease. "*Despite* my slightly differing agenda in doing so... we both know how it ended last time I tried that." He cast a slightly angry glance at Luna.

"But we *aren't* your enemy, Major," Celestia assured sternly.

"You really think they give a fuck?!" he choked out with a humorless laugh.

"Every minute I'm alive is a liability. I know things, lady, scary things. Things that should not be made public, and as far as they're concerned, I'm better off dead than risk being slowly tortured until I

crack and start hemorrhaging information.”

Celestia mentally reeled, horrified that he thought she would ever consider doing anything so horrible. “We would *never*—”

“Save it. I don’t think you would. That’s not my biggest concern right now. The fact still remains that I have to fix this. I had my job and I failed. My new job is to set this right, and I. Will. Not. Fail. This one.”

“So let’s say you actually manage to do that. What then? What is your long term plan here, and where does it leave *us*?”

He took a shallow breath, “I don’t know yet. That depends a great deal on how cooperative you guys want to be. I still have a job to do and now it seems I am the only one left alive to do it. If you stay out of the way and let me finish what needs to be done then we will all get along just *splendidly*.”

“I get the irritating feeling that this plan may prove counter productive to our own interests,” Luna voiced her obvious concerns.

“Your *interests* are not my priority,” he came off somewhat irritated, “but provided no one does anything stupid, you have nothing to fear from me. I have no desire to see any innocent ... *ponies* harmed. I can appreciate that this is a delicate situation for you as well, and I am willing to... *amend* some protocols to account for that. But you have to understand that I have responsibility to my men and my Corps, and ultimately my allegiance lies with them. I just want our shit squared away so I can go.”

Celestia wasn’t entirely satisfied with the deal he was proposing. Ideally she would have liked to get his full cooperation. Although hoping he would immediately hop on board with her was a fool’s wish, and in truth she would have been slightly disappointed if he had.

“I can understand your concerns, Major. And I would never ask you to betray your kind. But if this is going to work, I’ll need your help. I may have to ask certain things of you, and I need you to trust me to make these calls. I am sure at times it will seem very strange to

you, but you are in my world now. If you can agree to defer to my experience then we will be able to expedite this... *exchange* considerably.”

He stared at Celestia for a few moments, mentally examining the words for any potential traps. “I’ll do what I can. But I don’t answer to you. So long as your needs don’t conflict with my own then I am perfectly content with you taking the lead on this.”

Celestia smiled. It wasn’t much, but it was more than she had any right to hope for.

Luna piped up cheerily, “Marvelous! Now that we’re all such good friends, perhaps we could have desert?” she looked over at Shane’s monopoly of baked goods, “well... the *rest* of us at least.”

Pinkie Pie giggled, lightening the mood of the room considerably. It was a welcome change. Their conversations with the human usually fluctuated temperaments wildly, and it was good to be back on a semi civilized track.

The human sat back in his chair and idly ran his hands over the top of his cropped mane. He pressed a hand on his chin and twisted his neck over his shoulder producing a series of rapid pops as he cracked the vertebrae in his neck. The sound of cracking bones made Twilight’s spine shiver horridly. Her teeth seemed to itch, and the whole ordeal left her feeling sullied. She was barely aware of his hands trading places, apparently beginning to repeat the ritual in opposite.

“Please,” she started hoping to catch him. She did. And he shot her a curious glance. “Please don’t do that,” she begged, trying to remain sounding as pleasant as possible.

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Sorry. I just... *hate* that sound,” she explained hoping he would understand.

He shot a puff of amused air from his nostrils. He smirked slightly and held up his hands innocently and placed them gently on the

table in front of him.

A streak of discolored skin on the back of his left hand caught Twilight's attention. The scar was a sharp oval, perhaps an inch or so long. The healed tissue was depressed slightly. Several small dots lined the edges of the scar, where stitches had once held the incision closed. Twilight mentally weighed her options before venturing enough to ask what happened.

He looked down at the back of the hand Twilight indicated. He ran a finger over the scar. "Steak knife," he breathed already clearly reminiscing on the incident.

Celestia was suddenly feeling very confident about her decision to remove the knives from the table preemptively.

"Knife would be the direct cause, but I was hoping for more of an explanation," Twilight poked.

He smiled nostalgically. "*Steak knife* is all the explanation you're going to get," he asserted.

A bit disappointed Twilight was eager to pull him out a bit more. "What about those?" she indicated two smaller oval shaped scars on the knuckles of his first two fingers.

His smile widened, revealing a few of his carnivorous front teeth. "I got into a fistfight with a dumpster."

The answer was so comically unexpected, Celestia couldn't resist letting out a peal of laughter. His laugh was like the sound of soft morning bells. She wasn't the only one either. Fluttershy and Rarity seemed to be the only ones able to contain their merriment behind a hoof.

"Are you being serious?" Luna was able to ask as soon as she had caught her breath. Infinitely amused by the thought of the human exchanging blows with a treacherous waste receptacle.

"Unfortunately," he said, smiling good naturedly.

"Well that there sounds like quite a story," Applejack encouraged,

hoping for a few further details.

“Oh it is,” he assured the orange farm pony, “Unfortunately it’s not one I’ll be sharing any time soon.”

“Awww,” Pinkie deflated slightly.

Celestia was happy to see the group finally relaxing some, even though the topic of discussion was a bit macabre. He certainly had enough scars to keep the girls occupied for more than a few minutes.

“What’s *that one* from?” Dash asked eagerly from across the table.

“Which?”

Dash pointed to the same scar Twilight had noticed while he was unconscious in the hospital. A thin jagged line that ran parallel to the bottom of his right eyebrow.

He sighed deeply. “I tried to do a handstand on a grocery cart.”

“I take it you didn’t make it?” Twilight said slightly teasingly.

“No I made it. Perfect handstand... It was the dismount that got me.”

Twilight chuckled slightly. He wasn’t so bad when he wasn’t in that angry funk he had been dwelling in lately.

They asked about another on his ear, which he blamed on an accident involving something called a ‘car’.

“You got a lotta scars,” Pinkie summed up in between bites of cake.

He held his hand out in front of him and flexed his fingers, examining the appendages, “Dad would always say I came by em’ honestly,” he said wistfully.

Twilight’s ears perked immediately, seizing the piece of information with interest. ‘*Did he just share something personal?*’ she thought excitedly, holding as still as possible as if a sudden move would

scare him away.

However he already seemed to be withdrawing into himself, as if self conscious of the little insight. Twilight even attempted to get him to expand on the subject, but it seemed he had revealed all he was willing to for the time being. She inwardly sighed, resigning herself to the long tedious road of relationship building.

The night progressed as normally as it could given the fact that they were dining with a trans-dimensional creature. They made idle conversation, mostly just the girls asking the human any series of small questions about his home and more notably the other species that inhabited it, and subsequently which of those species he considered food.

The human occasionally took a swipe at the bottles of wine, but other than that stayed relatively well in check. He answered the girl's questions as they asked, so long as they kept the subject light. Anything too personal seemed to irritate him, so they were once again forced to abandon the line of interrogation. Dash very boldly prodded him with questions of his military exploits, to which he consistently responded with well rehearsed vague phrases to make it seem like he had given an answer when in fact he had merely entertained her with buzzwords. It was a tactic Celestia had resorted to several times when dealing with the multitude of ministers and advisors. It was a useful scheme, but all it ever seemed to do was buy some time, it never made the questions go away.

Celestia tuned back in to the conversation. Luna was busy trying to explain to the human why Equestria did not have any queen or king. Celestia was slightly bemused by the question. For all their similarities, it was the little cultural inconsistencies that fascinated Celestia.

The night wore on much more rapidly than Twilight usually remembered. She mentally berated herself for not bringing an ample supply of quills and scrolls. Twilight had learned enough about the human from the dinner to fill an encyclopedia. She took a moment to fantasize about the prospect. The more she thought the more certain she was that she planned to write a book about this

human. It was the case study that every scientist, scholar, and philosopher would kill for. She began mentally arranging chapters by context, and relevance.

She snapped herself out of the daydream. He would most likely not even entertain the idea of letting her pump him for information so she could write a book. And the princess would almost certainly not allow her to publish it, secretive as this whole fiasco was... Still the idea was fun to imagine.

Twilight suppressed a yawn, realizing just *how* late it really was. The other girls looked tired as well, with the exception of Pinkie Pie. The pink mare appeared to have finally consumed her fill of sweets. Although she was still quite energetically participating in the conversation, wired as she was on all the sugar.

The human was apparently getting tired as well. If his expressions were anything to judge by, she sometimes had trouble identifying his mood. The differences in facial features weren't even all that great, but the absence of normal pony ears and a tail made it surprisingly difficult. His usually stoic expression did nothing to help.

He shifted one of his arms on the table and something caught twilight's eye. There was a small smear of crimson where his arm had been resting. She reached for one of his arms, aggravated he had not allowed any further medical attention to his arms despite the princess' council.

He must have seen Twilight reaching towards him because he jerked away, shooting Twilight an alarmed/angry look. She mentally reminded herself she probably should have asked permission. She wasn't used to dealing with such jumpy creatures.

"Let me see." Twilight demanded, sounding slightly maternal.

The human looked down at the dark red stain on the white tablecloth. He reeled his arms close to him. "No,"

"You're still bleeding!" she sounded irritated, as if she had caught him doing something wrong.



Fluttershy had begun moving as soon as the words left Twilight's lips. She lifted herself into the air and began hovering over the table toward them to have a look for herself.

Shane caught the movement out of the corner of his eye. He beheld the yellow pegasus approaching and the colors drained from his face, his eyes panicked. He stood, knocking the chair to the ground, somehow snagging the tablecloth and sending a drinking glass shattering to the floor. He began backpedaling away from the table and the advancing pegasus.

Fluttershy stopped about halfway across the table upon seeing the reaction she stirred in the human. Her heart ached. Seeing the horror she induced in the creature made her feel like a monster.

"Whoa, *easy*," Twilight approached very slowly, trying to quiet the panicking human, "*It's okay. Calm down. She isn't going to hurt you, remember?*"

His eyes uncertainly flicked to Twilight before shooting back to the pegasus.

Celestia joined Twilight, offering soothing words. She waved Fluttershy back with a hoof, which seemed to calm the human down slightly. Although she doubted he would ever confess it, he was clearly terrified of the little pegasus.

Fluttershy backed away to a safer distance, tears already beginning to spill.

Shane was still watching her, stuck in a defensive stance. He didn't seem to be responding to any of the counseling Celestia or Twilight offered. He continued to watch the winged yellow mare, strangely enough because he usually strove to avoid eye contact with Fluttershy at all costs.

"Major?" Celestia asked, cautiously placing a hoof on his shoulder.

He started, apparently surprised by the contact. He looked at Celestia blinking a few times apparently snapping out of his frightened little stupor. He shrugged off Celestia's hoof, and she

removed it without complaint. He looked over at Twilight who was eyeing him with concern.

He looked down at the small mess he had made escaping the approaching pegasus. Twilight could have sworn she saw guilt cross his face as he beheld the sight. As if he had been caught doing something embarrassing. Maybe he was self-conscious of his own overreaction. It seemed logical, given his obvious stern character; she doubted he would be easy for him to admit the timid yellow pegasus frightened him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I was just... just..." Fluttershy was barely holding back a waterfall of tears. One of which spilled down her cheek preemptively. Rarity draped an arm over her shoulders dabbing a napkin at her cheek, doing her best to comfort the mare.

"It's perfectly alright, darling. You haven't done anything wrong," she soothed,

"I'm sure you just startled him," she made a note to shoot the human a slightly angry glare.

The corner of his lip curled back slightly, in apparent disgust of the tearful display of his nemesis.

"See? Just a misunderstanding," Luna explained, hoping to diffuse the situation a little. "Please, come sit down like a civilized pony."

He looked over at the moon princess and cocked an eyebrow at her.

"... *human*, whatever," she corrected. "Stop being so paranoid, if we wished to harm you we would have done it already. We just want to take a look at your arms and see how the bandages are holding. Nothing more."

He didn't move, he just continued to stand there casting uncertain looks at the group.

Luna sighed, and levitated one of the bottles of wine. She gasped slightly, "Look what I've got!" The bottle bobbed suggestively in front of her. She noticed she suddenly had his full attention. She magically removed the cork with a resounding pop.

“Luna,” Celestia warned.

Luna ignored her. “You want it?” She sounded suspiciously like somepony trying to train a puppy. “You gotta come geeet iiiit.” She tempted in a melodic tune.

Shane’s eyes narrowed angrily.

Celestia closed her own eyes and rubbed a temple with a golden shod hoof. “Luna you can’t seriously expecting him to come running just because you dangled a treat in front of his face.” She turned back toward Shane, hoping to apologize for her sister’s rude behavior. “I mean he isn’t a d...”

He was gone.

Celestia stared blankly at the empty space of floor that was previously occupied by the human. Celestia immediately swiveled her head back to Luna.

There he was, standing directly next to the beaming blue princess, his outer blouse lay discarded on the floor. The neck of the burgundy bottle of icewine was firmly clutched in his right fist, gulping the sweet alcohol. His left arm was stretched out in front of Luna, allowing her access to the limb as she began magically unwrap his bandages.

Celestia watched, too stunned to speak for a moment. A small part of her was wondering how he had managed to get out of his blouse and over there so quickly. “You’ve got to be kidding me...” was all she could think to say.

Shane looked at her out of the corner of his eye. He stopped drinking only long enough to say, “Don’t judge me,” before wrapping his lips back around the bottleneck, apparently doing his best to suck down the entire bottle in one go.

Celestia was trying desperately to suppress the headache that was growing behind her eyes.

“Wow... Look at him go,” Dash chuckled.

“Should we stop him?” Twilight whispered to Celestia.

Celestia knew they should but she found herself wholly unmotivated to do so. There was also that old dictum, something about taking away a dog’s bone and how it was usually a bad idea.

He finally stopped drinking; almost a fourth of the dessert wine was gone. He licked his teeth, looking highly content despite heavily watering eyes.

“Are you happy now?” Luna asked, with a soft smile.

“I’m more of a white wine kinda guy.” He shrugged and took another quick swig and clicked his tongue, “Not bad though.”

Luna finished unwrapping his arm, discarding the sullied bandaging. Several of the lacerations on his arms looked as though they had reopened multiple times. Fluttershy was right, they needed stitching. Since magical healing was too risky to attempt, they were most likely going to have to literally sew his skin back together. A slightly primitive procedure, but effective nonetheless. If they did nothing they would merely continue to tear open.

Luna tentatively pulled on the edge of a cut. A small trickle of blood began to fill the fleshy slash.

Luna removed the bandages on his other arm. His right arm wasn’t as bad as his left, but still required more than bandages to properly close the wounds.

Applejack whistled upon seeing the numerous gashes. “How in Equestria did ya manage ta do all that again?”

“I fell down,” he said simply.

“He jumped through a window,” Twilight explained, shooting him an annoyed look. To which he returned a toothy grin.

“That seems a tad... extreme, does it not?” Rarity chimed in.

“No. Go big or go home,” he offered as explanation.

"I thought'cha *wanted* ta git home."

"It's just an expressio- OW!" He jerked his arm away from Luna.

"Oh hush. I barely touched it," She defended. He merely shook his head and took another healthy gulp of the bottle with his free arm. "These are going to need proper attention soon," Luna continued, "I shall arrange one of our physicians to dress them tomorrow morning. They keep tearing open, and I won't have you *leaking* all over my castle."

"I *hate* doctors," he sneered.

"Is there anything you *don't* hate?"

"... no."

Celestia was glad to see he was under control, but she couldn't help but be slightly aggravated. Here she had been doing everything in her power to maintain as professionally political a relationship as possible with the human, which in turn achieved nothing. Then all Luna had to do was dangle a bottle of alcohol in front of him and she had him wrapped around her hoof. He was even willingly allowing Luna to touch him. If anypony else had tried that he would have most likely taken a swing at them. Some small part of her merely blamed the fact that Luna tended to grease the wheels of compliance with treats.

Celestia began to wonder if she had been taking the wrong approach all along. Perhaps Luna was right. Celestia had been treating him too much like a foreign dignitary. He was no diplomat, his lack of social graces made that painfully obvious. But Luna seemed to be treating him more like a pet. "*No*," Celestia corrected herself, Luna was treating him as a familiar. She was not coddling him, as Celestia was. At first Celestia had pegged Luna's behavior as belittling to the severity of the situation, which it may have been, but in doing so she was also calming the group down. She acted as though this were all a fun game. He was not a politician, he was a soldier, and probably more accustomed to the less formal avenues that Luna was succeeding with. Celestia made a note to rethink her strategies with him.

Luna was finishing up wrapping the human's shredded arms when there was a knock at the door, ceasing all conversation and jolting everypony's attention. Celestia had been painfully clear she wasn't to be disturbed. The shiny brass door knob slowly turned, as the intruder opened the door from the other side.

Celestia suppressed a sense of panic. She briefly considered stuffing Shane under the table, but she seriously doubted he would take that well.

The armored head of the guard commander poked through. Celestia let out the breath she had inadvertently been holding. She also gave the Commander a glare for scaring her in such a fashion.

"Highness, I..." he paused and took a moment to look befuddled by what was surely a strange scene. Luna was bandaging a human who appeared to be doing his best to try and drown himself on land.

"Who's that?" Shane leaned down and asked Luna in what must have been an attempt at a hushed tone.

"That's Aegis. You've already met him several times."

"Oh... they all look the same to me," Shane, half saluted him with the bottle,

"Hey, buddy."

Aegis was unamused, but otherwise did not respond, and instead continued, "... I apologize but I feel it's my duty to inform you, that morning *should* be arriving shortly. If I may be as bold as to suggest that her majesties conclude any business with our *guest*. Some ponies may decide to return to the castle early, and it would behoove us to keep it away from any unwanted eyes."

"Ha! '*Behoove*'... get it? '*Be-Hoof*'? It's funny because you're horses," Shane chuckled as he sipped from the half-empty bottle.

"Ponies." Luna corrected automatically.

"Whatever."

Aegis was covering his amusement with a scowl of irritation, “Is he *drunk?*”

Shane snorted. “You’re adorable,” he laughed cynically, “bring me like... six more of these then we’ll talk.” he peered at the bottle a bit disappointedly.

Something Luna found incredibly interesting was his behavior around Aegis, or the guards. He never seemed particularly concerned around them. Short of Celestia or herself, they probably posed the biggest danger to him and yet he acted as if they were no threat at all. He was much more ill at ease in a room of young fillies than surrounded by an escort of hulking armored guards.

Luna wondered at the phenomenon. She supposed it made some sense. If he was a human warrior it seemed sensible that the guards would be the ones he identified most with. At least *they* were an enemy he could understand. He knew where he stood with them and he accepted it. There were no back alley politics or hidden agendas, amongst them. Or at least, not as far as he was concerned.

“Thank you, Commander. That will be all.” Celestia ordered.

Aegis bowed his head and retreated back through the door.

Celestia returned her attention to the group. “He’s right, girls. You should get some rest. Morning will be here soon and you need your sleep. Tomorrow you may do as you wish. Luna, the Major, and I have some business to attend after the sun sets.”

“Can we come?” Pinkie Pie asked excitedly. The group eagerly awaited her response.

Celestia was silent for a very brief moment. She glanced at the human who had lost any of his former happiness, “I’m not sure that would be wise, girls.”

“Pleeeeeeeaaaaaasssee?”

Celestia sighed deeply. The girls did know what they were asking for. It was not going to be a fun errand, and the girls had been through enough lately. She supposed she could allow them to come,

they'd certainly earned the right and she never intended to keep them in that dark about anything, but at the same time she couldn't help but feel this was something that would be better handled in relative privacy. The human did not seem particularly emotional, but it was undoubtedly going to be difficult for him. She doubted a crowd would make it any easier. She looked over at him, hoping to gauge his reaction to the idea.

His face was just as expressionless as ever. His emotions hidden perfectly behind his mask of stern indifference. He offered no council other than to take another long drink from the bottle.

"Major?" she started after it became clear he was not going to answer her on his own.

He inclined his head slightly, "... It's fine." he answered, hardly above a whisper.

Celestia inspected him for a moment. She wondered if she had inadvertently maneuvered him into a corner.

"Yay!" Pinkie chirped, clopping her hooves together softly.

Celestia was not pleased with this turn of events. "Luna? Why don't you take the Major for a quick tour before morning comes? I'll join you after I see the girls off."

Luna looked at Celestia suspiciously for a moment before picking up on what Celestia was playing at. She wanted to speak with the girls alone without implicating the human.

Luna nodded, "That seems a lovely idea. Come along, Major Doran. It would be an honor to show you my home." Luna stood prompting Shane to do the same. He stopped and looked longingly at the bottle of wine he was leaving behind. He shot Luna a questioning look. "... you can bring the bottle," she deadpanned, slightly amused.

He smiled and scooped up the half empty bottle of dessert wine. He made sure to follow Luna around the Fluttershy-less side of the table.



“Goodnight girls.” Luna chimed before two of the four guards opened the door for her.

The girls all stood for the departure of the Princess, and offered their farewells and goodnights to Luna and the departing human.

Luna returned them in kind and passed through the doorway.

Shane did not reply as formally, his only goodbye was, “Ladies.” and offering a backward wave as he followed Luna out the door, two guards following close behind.

Twilight scanned about the table at all her friends, each looking slightly more apprehensive than the last. They weren’t stupid, they knew something was amiss. Something was bothering Celestia and she wanted the human out of the way before she discussed it.

Rarity was the first to break the silence, “Princess, I do hope I am not overstepping my boundaries, but is there something you aren’t telling us?”

Celestia shifted to a slightly more comfortable position in her seat and refolded her wings before taking a deep breath and choosing her words. “It was never my intention to keep information from you. You seek answers and you are certainly within your rights to do so. I hesitate only because I am uncertain the answers are mine to give.”

“I apologize, your Highness, but I am afraid I don’t understand.”

Celestia sighed once more. She looked downward at the half finished dish in front of her before raising her head and speaking in a slightly dry tone. “With all the excitement it’s rather easy to forget, but Major Doran did not come here alone. Ten of his kind were killed in the crash, and he has requested to view them for himself. I assume he wishes to say his final goodbyes or gain some closure. We have offered to deal with the remains as he sees fit, but he has been rather insistent on personally attending the matter.”

Twilight felt a lead weight hit her stomach as she realized what they had invited themselves to. No wonder the Princess had been

hesitant to allow them along.

“What should we do, Princess?” Twilight asked dreadfully.

“I am unfamiliar with human death rituals, if they even have any. I assumed he would have liked a measure of privacy, but I’m afraid you have already committed yourselves. He has said he would permit your attendance. For all we know he is honoring us by allowing us to take part, backing out now may offend him. My advice would be to attend, be respectful, and stay as quiet as possible unless he instructs you to do otherwise.”

The group contemplated their new predicament, but it seemed the princess was right, they couldn’t very well excuse themselves now.

Pinkie Pie took a more optimistic view on the situation. She was adamant that this was the best thing they could do. After all nopony should have to do something so sad all alone. “Friends shouldn’t let friends go through that without friends,” she had stated simply.

While her intentions were well placed, Twilight had the distinct feeling Shane was not the kind to appreciate any of the touchy feely ministrations the group may offer. And while they were not at present active enemies, she very much doubted he considered them his friends. One thing she knew for certain, they were in for another difficult day.

~~~~~

Celestia trotted briskly along the marbled hallway leading up to Luna’s tower-top suite. After seeing the girls to their rooms and bidding them goodnight she set off after Luna. It only took a second for Celestia to locate her sister with a quick magical ping.

It seemed the tour had concluded in Luna’s quarters. Celestia chuckled inwardly at the thought of little Luna eager to show her new friend her room. Celestia had to remind herself that Luna was older than almost every other pony currently living, but part of Celestia would always think of Luna as her baby sister.

The escort of royal guards stood outside Luna’s chamber door,

mixed in with the usual cadre of night sentinels that traditionally protected the lunar princess. The groups had a somewhat... sordid past, and usually tended to avoid one another. Luckily they seemed to be blending fairly well. They were, after all, very well trained, and far too well disciplined to allow their differences to impede duty.

The armored stallions all parted, cleaving a clear path for the princess to the door. Celestia didn't bother knocking. A small swish of the horn with a soft glow and the dark wood stained doors swung inward on heavy polished hinges, revealing the bedchambers of the night princess.

Celestia strode inside, glancing over the room and finding her sister sitting at a little table opposite the human. Luna was sitting proudly over the small table on which rested a crystal chess set; Luna had apparently somehow talked the human into playing.

The human himself sat on the other end he briefly flicked his attention to Celestia before returning his focus to the game. By the look on his face, he was taking his next move very seriously. He shifted around slightly, observing the board from different angles.

"Behold, dear sister. I have taught the human to play a civilized game."

If Celestia could recall, the younger princess' style of chess-play could be called anything but civil. 'Vindictive' would have been a slightly more appropriate description. As far as Celestia could recall, Luna had yet to lose a game.

Luna sighed impatiently. "Anytime now, Major."

"Shut up, I'm thinking" he muttered without breaking concentration.

Celestia sympathized with the human. She had long since refused to ever play the wretched game with her sister again. Luna cheated, and Celestia knew so, even if she couldn't prove it. She waited patiently to see if the human would fair any better against the board game depravities of her baby sister.

He rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands, forming a little pyramid with his fingers. He reached out and deftly scooted his only remaining bishop a few diagonal squares. He looked to Luna who was still wearing a hungry smile, as if the move was the very thing she needed to assure her victory.

Without skipping a beat Luna issued her counter move, and from the muttered swearing of the Major, Celestia gathered he wasn't exactly in a commanding lead. Although, to his credit, he had managed to take far more of Luna's pieces than Celestia normally did. That said, it was still a paltry sum in comparison to the number Luna had stacked up.

The human carefully placed another piece.

Luna inched a rook into place, "Checkmate!" she preened.

He pushed the board away distastefully, causing a few pieces to wobble and fall, while Luna merely beamed triumphantly.

"Do not feel too bad, Major," she leaned down toward his head and said in a slightly hushed tone, "*she cheats.*"

"I figured that out about twenty moves ago." he panned.

"Slander and lies." Luna defended.

They spoke for a few moments about the plans for the next day. Due to obvious reasons, they decided that it would be wisest to plan most of their activities in the relative quiet of the night. Daytime was simply too risky due to the heightened levels of activity. Celestia understood the necessity but wished it could have been otherwise, for it meant she was only going to lose more of her precious allotted sleep time.

Luna tentatively re-approached the topic of his crew and what he wished done with them.

"I don't know yet," he admitted, "I don't recall reading any excerpts on how to handle this particular scenario in the *casualty procedure manual*. Ideally speaking it would be my duty to get them all home, so we can lay them to rest on American soil. You know... *No man*

*left behind.*” He became somewhat somber. “But then I wake up and remember... I’m probably never going to see my home again.”

“Do not abandon hope so readily. We will try, Major. We still might be able to get you back.” Celestia attempted to assure.

“Right, and I have the word ‘Naïve’ tattooed on my ass.”

“No you don’t,” Luna pointed out confused.

Shane rubbed his eyes with his thumb and index finger, “Wow, you should *not* know that.”

Celestia chuckled softly, “You found a way to get here, Major. We’ll find a way back. There has to be one.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, and there really doesn’t. Any of the physical laws we relied on, the laws we based our technology on, might not apply here. And let’s not forget that even if you *could* rebuild the fucked-to-death pile of burning scrap metal that *used* to be a ship, and get it *working*... I still wouldn’t know how to drive it home.” He sank into a contemplative silence.

Celestia considered him for a moment. He seemed to already be resigning himself to his fate. “You are simply going to quit then?” She challenged.

“No,” he rejected quietly, “never quit. But I also won’t waste my time fueling delusion.”

“I prefer to think of it as *hope*.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” he dismissed, “I have this mess to police up before I can even think about that. I’ll square away here, then leave... one way or another.”

She and Luna exchanged an uneasy looks. Disturbed by the finality with which he spoke.

He stood, taking them both by surprise. “If you don’t mind I would very much like to be returned to my cell,” he said coldly, bringing the conversation to an abrupt close. “Will one of you be escorting

me? Or should I find my own way back?"

Celestia stood, "I suppose we'll have to convince you to find *real* room soon." The princess exited the room, Shane following without another word.

~~~~~

Luna sat curled on the center of her lush bed, awaiting the return of her elder sister.

Celestia's return was prompt to say the least. With her errand complete, the snow white alicorn slipped inside Luna's chamber door. The second she was alone with her sister Celestia visibly deflated. Her shoulders sagged and she slumped down on a large sunken dais.

"You should sleep," Luna noted quietly.

"There is too much to be done," she mumbled. "I must raise the sun soon, and the courts will start to notice I keep disappearing without explanation."

Luna watched her elder sister with concern, "You have remained awake for... what, three days? Go and raise your sun, but then come and rest, if only for a few hours. I shall handle your *nobles*. They must learn that you are a princess, and not some terrier to be summoned at their whim."

Celestia chuckled, "They mean well, Luna. They only wish to ensure that they each receive the attention they deserve. After all, a ruler who ignores the need of her subjects is not a ruler."

"You give too much of yourself, sister," Luna warned, "You only provide Equestria a disservice by running yourself ragged."

"I know my limits," Celestia defended.

"Do you?"

Celestia shot her sister an annoyed look, "You seem to forget, *baby* sister, that I ruled Equestria *alone* for the better part of one

thousand years.”

Luna recoiled slightly, “Well you aren’t alone anymore. To continue to act as if you were is foolish. But you are not without your point. I will hold court in your stead, this morning, while you rest. I shall allow you to take over around noon. Then I might even sleep myself a bit, or perhaps I should take the human for a walk. I’m sure he’ll be cagey after spending the day in his cell,” Luna tapped her chin with a hoof, “we should really toss in something for him to play with. Or maybe put in some rocks for him to climb on.”

Celestia chuckled, fairly certain Luna was kidding, “You are certain you wouldn’t mind filling in for me a bit?” Celestia asked.

“Of course not,” Luna lifted her chin haughtily.

“Very well then. It seems the matter has already been decided. If you *do* let the human out of his cage, I would advise you to use caution should you decide to try and slip a leash on him.” She added teasingly.

Luna’s ears perked up slightly and her one eyebrow lifted toward Celestia at the thought.

“Luna, don’t you dare.” Celestia warned, recognizing the prankish look in Luna’s eyes. She was worried Luna might actually attempt to do it just to spite her.

“I was only joking,” Luna defended with a light laugh.

They shared a small laugh but the merriment was halfhearted and subdued.

Luna became somewhat serious. She mindlessly kneaded the sheets with shoeless blue hoof, “I am troubled, sister.”

It was slightly unlike Luna to be so forward with her emotions. Not that she was ever introverted, it was just unusual for her to be so direct.

“Wanna talk about it?” Celestia offered, casually.

Luna inhaled, "I fear we may have dug ourselves into a hole from which we can not climb out. I keep attempting to imagine a scenario in which this ends happily for everypony. But... try as I might, I can not."

Celestia had shared similar thoughts.

Luna continued, "We *barely* contained the situation, Celestia, *barely*. Eventually we will have to go public. And when we do...?" Luna shook her head. "Do you realize what this could do to Equestria? To the world? Celestia... this could spark a war."

"I know, Luna. I know. We will find a way to solve this. We are not without options."

"The political backlash alone could be catastrophic," Luna went on, "Ponies will start panicking."

"They might *not*," Celestia countered.

"Celestia, please. That you are not alone in this universe is hardly idle news. And to be honest, I do not believe it is something the average pony is ready to hear."

"Luna, calm yourself. You worry about events that may never come to pass. We have a plan. Provided the human plays his part, we can still win this game. Do not give in to such dreadful thoughts."

"Then I suppose the question becomes; will the beast cooperate?"

"It will take time, but he will eventually come around. He is merely being cautious of us. I would probably too, were I in his position. He doesn't seem to know what to make of us, yet. One thing he *does* know, is that we are his best and only ticket home. And, for now, that has bought us his trust, fleeting as it is."

"And what if we *can't* send him home. He won't stop, you know." Celestia stopped and stared at Luna, "He'll try again."

Celestia sighed, deflating some, "I know." The thought had been playing in the back of Celestia's mind as well. She had been doing her best to avoid thinking about it.



“... well?” Luna prodded. “What are you going to do?”

“We will stop him, of course.” Celestia said immediately.

Luna was silent for a long painful moment, “Should we?”

Celestia froze, locking eyes with her midnight blue sibling, “Do you really think otherwise?”

“I don’t know,” Luna admitted, somewhat uncertainly, “is it really our choice to make, Celestia? The more I think about it the more I believe he is right; the odds of us being able to send him home are astronomic, to say the least. Can we really force him to stay? Can we force him to *live*?”

Celestia mulled over Luna’s argument, wondering at her slightly reversed position on this human’s life. Perhaps she had changed her views after seeing he was a being with a personality and emotions, blunt though they may be. She hated contemporary issues.

Luna continued, apparently anticipating Celestia’s train of thought, “Yes, I stopped him the first time, and justly so, he was not in his right mind, but if he makes a conscious informed decision... ” Luna trailed off.

For all her years, there were still some matters that never seemed to resolve themselves easily. Celestia did not have all the answers, and she would be the first to admit it.

“Even if we *did* make him stay, would *you* be able to live a life of abject solitude? How much loss can one take? He has already lost his friends, and for all we know he has left behind a family; a mother, a father, a mate, maybe even foals! Could you really *live* knowing you could never see them again? Would you *want* to?”

That gave Celestia some pause. She had never considered him to be the fatherly type, “I don’t know, Luna,” Celestia said, deflating. She was exhausted as it was and had little desire to reflect on such weighty issues. “Maybe you’re right, but none of this need be decided now. We still have time. Who knows, maybe we’ll find a way to send him back and everypony will be happy. Until then we

have yet to get it straight from the human's mouth. We don't know for certain that he's planning anything so drastic. He might just be venting. Either way he isn't going to attempt anything soon. Of that I am certain. He might be brusque but he isn't a fool. We have no choice but to wait and see."

~~~~~

"Is *toothpaste* candy!?" the human demanded.

"You can't keep using oral hygiene products as examples! Those are different! You don't *eat* toothpaste!" Pinkie defended ferociously.

"You don't eat bubblegum either, but that's candy."

"It's different!!!"

Twilight plastered her ears against her head attempting to drown out the argument that had been growing steadily for the past ten minutes or so, and from the sound of it had been the subject of some controversy between the two for some time. When *peppermint* became such a hot button issue, Twilight had no idea, but the two seemed to never tire of debating its confectionary legitimacy.

The sun had just set, clearing the way for their little excursion. The remains of the other humans were sent to a private government research lab not terribly far from the castle. Unfortunately that still meant wandering into the open where any who cared to look out their window might catch a glimpse of the group. Still, not many went out after dark, a few with a penchant for the night, but they tended to stay on the more lively side of Canterlot where the younger ponies would frequent bars and nightclubs, the existence of which seemed to amuse the human to no end.

The path to the facility was a short one, however, and well out of the way of the night-life side of the city. The area was mostly offices and small businesses, all of which would be closed at this hour. If they moved briskly they would safe from any unwanted attention before anypony knew they were there.

"It's common knowledge!"

“YOU’RE *common knowledge!!!*”

“OMYGOSH! Enough already!” Dash exclaimed, “You two have been arguing this stupid point for like... *ever*. Everypony knows peppermints *aren’t* candy.”

“HA!” Shane shouted victoriously at Pinkie Pie.

“What?” Applejack chimed in, suddenly interested. “A’ course peppermints r’ candy.”

“They are not!” Rainbow objected, vehemently. She landed in front of the farm pony in an offensive stance, to which AJ responded in kind, matching her like an angry mirror.

“They are so! Why else would they sell em’ at *candy* stores.” Applejack pointed.

“Yeah!” Pinkie Pie agreed enthusiastically.

“I can’t *believe* you are all *arguing* like a bunch of ruffians over something so obviously unimportant,” Rarity chided, “Besides, a mint is obviously merely a means through which ponies *cleanse* the pallet, after dining,” she added with a slightly arrogant huff.

“... that counts toward my side,” Shane announced, pointing a finger at Rarity.

“I am not on anypony’s *side*,” Rarity rejected. “But if I were to take a stance on this pointless squabble, I would say that while peppermint may not be a candy *per se*. It is perfectly acceptable for it to be enjoyed as such. The sweet is in the eye of the beholder.”

“... still counts toward my side.”

“*Technically* ‘peppermint’ is just the hybrid byproduct of spearmint and water mint plants. Its naturally high levels of menthyl acetate, activates cold-sensitive receptors in the skin and mucosal tissues. Due to that high menthol content, it quickly came to be used from everything to culinary flavorings to soap to pesticides and even medicine.” Twilight reported, proudly flexing her pointless-knowledge-muscles.

The group ceased walking for a moment, all pausing to affix Twilight with a speechless stare.

“What,” Twilight asked lowering her ears at the sudden attention, “it was in the encyclopedia.”

“You read the *encyclopedia*?” the human asked in disbelief.

“Well not all at once, but I’ll occasionally pick it up if I want something light to pass the time.”

“... *light*?” he repeated again, still a slightly suspicious look in his eye. He turned to the rest of the group. Rainbow was facehoofing as if Twilight were embarrassing the whole group with her rampant nerdiness.

Applejack was chuckling softly. “You’ll get used to it, sugarcube. Books r’ kinda her thing.”

Shane shook his head, as if to shake off the whole scenario, “*Alright then*,” he sighed and continued walking, “... and don’t call me sugarcube.”

“Sure thing, honey-do,” Applejack teased.

“Sugarcube was fine,” he rectified, annoyed.

Celestia watched amusedly from a few feet behind the group. The darkened passages of the castle seemed a strange photo negative of their daytime counterparts. They were of course the same hallways and corridors, but in the cool veil of night they seemed to take on different personalities entirely. They were same, yet not. It was one of the brilliantly inexplicable truths of the divide, one of the beautiful mysteries of her art. She loved it. Day and night; balance in its most prominent form. She loved the emotion that eschewed linguistic precincts in favor of more primal sonorous chords that could never be truly understood.

She snapped back to reality, fearing she would lose herself in such cosmic thoughts. She mentally berated herself for allowing for such whimsicality when important matters demanded her full attention. Especially now.

Celestia had, by some miracle, managed to convince the bulk of their armored escorts to remain at the castle. She did not want a parade or soldiers marching through the city, even if the area would be mostly deserted. The less conspicuous their party, the better.

They decided to forgo front door, choosing instead to duck through the library to a much more subtle exit. They quickly reached the vast library, passing through aisles of shelving layered with row upon row of ancient tomes. The human stretched out an arm and brushed his fingers against the cool bindings of the books as they walked. Something about the action struck Celestia as slightly childlike giving the human a strange newfound sense of innocence. He promptly ruined the moment by making a few fairly derogatory remarks about ponies being able to read. It was probably his attempt at a joke, he did have a somewhat... *depraved* sense of humor after all, so Celestia let it slide without comment. Twilight didn't seem to take the remark as well, shooting him an angry glare, which satirically seemed to do nothing but further amuse him.

They cautiously pushed through a set of unremarkable double doors, leading to the eastern courtyard. They dropped down a small flight of curved marble steps, which looked a pale blue in the shimmer of the moonlight.

The sudden change of atmosphere seemed to slap the casualness right out of the human, who suddenly became very tense, stepping out into the cool dark courtyard air. Celestia recalled that ever since his brief failed escape, it was the first time he had actually been outside in the open. His eyes immediately began eagerly scouring his surroundings.

They were led by the two sentinels down the short marbled stairway leading away from the library. A stone pathway cut across the courtyard. The courtyard was a large open expanse of grass, bisected with thin stone lanes leading various places.

The path they were on led them across the stretch of land and into the sprawling eastern gardens. Through which they could make their trek though Canterlot with much more subtlety.

The human was still scanning the horizon in little sectors, again and

again. He even bothered to occasionally walk backwards, which was rather impressive given he only had two legs to balance himself on.

Rainbow Dash, apparently bored with walking, began to lazily flap her cyan wings. She slowly gained altitude as she circled the group occasionally executing a little flip or spin.

Celestia returned her attention to the earthbound group and noticed the human studiously tracking Rainbow Dash across the night sky with a small smile. Rainbow Dash certainly did not want for talent. She was indeed amusing to watch. Celestia had to imagine this would be doubly true for the human. If the ponies he was used to could neither talk nor fly, seeing them do both must prove a strange sight indeed.

Passing through the lavishly attended east garden took only a few short moments, as it was considerably smaller than its counterpart on the west side of the palace grounds, but the short walk seemed to wash away much of the sorrow that the little yellow pegasus had been visibly sulking in. She straightened up and hovered gently off the ground flitting from place to place, admiring nature in all its moonlight splendor. She occasionally would pass a little too close to the human who, without fail, would slowly inch away, shying to whichever side of the formation she was not currently occupying.

They finally reached the eastern gates. They were open, as they always were, so the ponies of Canterlot could have free access to the royal gardens. She knew many of the local business ponies enjoyed taking their lunch in the relative solitude the expanse of greenery offered from the hustle of the city.

They passed under the golden arch of the gateway. The shift from flowers and grass to stone and marble was a sudden one, and seemed to do nothing but further agitate the human, who now had a full circle of streets, alleys, windows, and rooftops, to worry about. What exactly he was expecting to happen, Celestia had no idea, but he seemed to be growing more apprehensive as the group progressed.

Fluttershy had rejoined the formation when they exited the gardens,

prompting Shane to casually retreat behind Twilight and Applejack for the relative protection they might offer from the little pegasus.

Celestia moved closer, "Relax, Major. You seem tense." It was a drastic understatement but she felt it better to downplay the situation.

His hand was resting on the side of his thigh as he walked, "I want my sidearm back," he started simply, as his eyes continued to scan rooftops and alleyways.

Celestia repressed the urge to roll her eyes, "No," she replied adamantly. "You running around with a weapon is the last thing we need."

"Let me re-phrase," he started with a warm smile, but suddenly became very serious when he continued, "*Give me my gun back.*" He stared directly into Celestia's bright violaceous eyes, his own blue irises seeming dull and muted by comparison, but still filled with cold fire that served to accentuate the sincerity of his demand.

Celestia returned his stare without missing a step, "No," she repeated softly, her tone indicating she had no intention of reversing her position. "I understand you are probably still a little wary of us but I can not afford to let you walk around with one of those things, blasting somepony every time you get excited." He snorted distastefully, clearly not thinking much of Celestia at the moment. "You are just going to have to trust that you are in no danger, and even if you *were*, we are more than capable of protecting you."

He laughed bitterly, "You think I'm fuckin' retarded don't you?"

It was a rhetorical question so Celestia didn't even bother answering, worrying instead about the growing volume of his voice echoing off the buildings.

"You people are the biggest load of fucking hypocrites I have ever encountered in my life."

"Lower your voice, Major," Luna piped up as she trotted over to

where he and her sister were walking, “Somepony might hear you and the *last* thing we need right now is more attention.”

“Oh *I’m sorry*. Am I placing you in a compromising position?” he answered with mock penitence, also not lowering his voice at all. “That must be very difficult for you. I mean, were I in *your* little horseshoes and I found myself responsible for some godless predator from another world, I can see how I wouldn’t want him making a big scene for all my innocent ponies to come see. It could make for a pretty nasty situation. After all, we couldn’t have him blowing the lid off this lovely little veil of ignorance I’ve woven for them.”

Celestia *really* didn’t like where he was taking this.

“I’m just sayin’ I can see how such a scenario would be uncomfortable for *me*, personally. Especially if he decided to go and start making demands in aforementioned *precarious position*. Denying him said demands in such a situation might not be the most *prudent* move.” He let his implied threat hang in the air for a few moments. He stopped walking, bringing the group to a halt. “I think if such a setting were to come to pass one might find it interesting how the balance of power... *shifts*.” He finished with an evil smile.

There were lead weights in her stomach. Celestia hated to admit but she should have seen this coming. She was supremely confident that, if he felt it necessary, he would have no trouble blowing the whistle on this whole operation, even if it meant dragging himself down with it. With the lessened number of guards and the sensitive environment, he was in the perfect position to start trouble. Ultimately she had little room to maneuver, he was giving them a pretty clear cut, ‘give me what I want or I bring this whole thing down around our heads’. At the same time she refused to return him his weapon. She was stuck.

There was a tacit thickness in the silence that carried the weight of his threats. He looked at Celestia and pursed his lips and rested his stretched his arms behind his back,

“... yup.” He nodded as if agreeing with himself, “Good thing *that’s*



not happening, huh?” he grinned evilly, backing down.

Celestia let out her pent up breath, shooting him an extremely annoyed look even as a wave of relief washed over her. “Do you enjoy antagonizing me, Major?” Celestia rubbed the side of her temple with a hoof.

“Yes,” he admitted, “but I have my reasons. He leaned in closer so Celestia would have no trouble hearing him, “I’d like to point out that during my stay here I could have, at any point, *really* ruined your day had I chosen to. But I didn’t. You say I need to trust you? I’ve put up my end, Princess. Where is yours?” He let the question hang accusingly for a moment. “You demand my trust yet you offer none of your own. You say we’re on the same team yet I am routinely chained to the wall in a locked cell and placed under guard. You want me to trust you with *my life* when you won’t trust me with a *fork*? I’ve let you get away with shit other people would have died for. I have *well* exceeded the amount of trust any smart man would have placed in you.”

“What possible reason could you have to mistrust us?” Luna asked, slightly hurt, “We’ve done nothing but try to help you.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that. But that’s kinda my point. *YOU* told me that. Try to take a look from my position, *if you can*. Wake up after the fact and be *told* that everyone else is dead. Be *told* the ponies are your friends, and be *told* the only way your getting home is to cooperate. For all I really *know*; you fed *them* all the same bullshit story you’re feeding me, about how they were the ‘only survivor’ and they should give up all their secrets with the very noble and promising dream of going home, then shot them in the back of the head and woke up the next guy.”

“Do you really think that?” Luna questioned, in a tone that Celestia had difficulty identifying.

He scrutinized the alicorn, as if reviewing all he knew of her and her species. Luna was probably the closest to him as far as size, but when she was on all fours, he still had to look down to make eye contact with her. “... No,” he admitted after a brief moment, “to be perfectly honest, I don’t think you guys have the balls to pull off

something so devious.” Celestia was unsure if she should be complimented or not. “... but I’m keeping it within the realm of possibilities.”

Luna was disturbed that his mind had led him to such horrific scenarios, yet at the same time slightly amused by his imagination, grim though it may be. “So if you think we might be leading you to your death, why are you still here?” She chuckled humorlessly, “How do you know we aren’t leading you to the torture chamber?”

“I guess we’re gonna find out, aren’t we?” He returned her confused stare with a playful pat on the cheek, “S’go,” he turned and continued to walk, apparently eager to get to his possible demise.

The lunar princess was busy reeling at the gross amounts of his duplicity in the contact. But more concerned was she that he actually brought up a fairly good point. He was right; they had been unfairly leveling the playing field in their favor.

Luna trotted a bit faster, “We are not without reason, Major.” Luna attempted to mediate once she caught up with the human, “You are correct. We have been unfair to you thus far, and for that I apologize. You have to understand we acted only out of concern for the safety of our own subjects. You ask us to look at this from your perspective, I ask you to do the same. Whether it is intentional or not, you are a threat to us and our very way of life.”

“I understand,” he relented. “My treatment at your... *hooves* is not what irritates me.” Luna’s ears perked curiously, “What bothers me, is that you do so while preaching to me the importance of *mutual trust*, when you clearly have no intention of practicing it.” He continued walking as he spoke, fingers still drumming on the empty space on his thigh that was previously occupied by a holster. “Truthfully, you are being much more forgiving in this situation than I would.” Luna had assumed as much. “But let’s not pretend this is something it’s not. I know the score, princess. So spare me the campfire conviviality and save the PR for the crowd, I’m not buying it.”

“I am not trying to sell you anything, Major,” Luna said amusedly, “I am merely doing the best I can despite the circumstances.”

“That’s all anyone ever really *can* do,” he summed up neatly. “But I still want my gun back.”

“We’ll talk about that later.”

“That’s just politician speak for ‘*fuck off*’.” he complained.

“For what possible reason could you need a gun?” she asked. “I can’t have you going around killing ponies.”

“I don’t need the gun to kill you, you know,” he pointed out. “If anything you should *want* me to have the gun. At least that way you know you’d die relatively quick and painless.”

Luna sighed blew an azure lock of glittering mane away from her eye. “You are not strengthening my resolve to re-arm you, Major.”

“Just making sure you have an informed opinion.” He teased.

Celestia strode abreast of the two, “I feel it necessary to point out, Major, none of *us* are carrying weapons,” she noted, joining in on the conversation.

“*You’re* a seven foot tall magical pony and have a large spike growing the front of your face. Oh and also you can apparently fly. But I don’t want the gun because I plan on *using* it.” he retorted.

“Why want it then?” Celestia posed.

“It’s a comfort thing,” he relented, with a sigh. “How would you feel without your fancy hat or giant necklace?”

“Quite relieved, I should imagine.” Celestia chuckled, rolling her shoulders slightly, adjusting her royal regalia.

“Well I feel naked without it,” he paused and eyeballed the two princesses, “not that you people would understand the feeling.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Luna perked at the defamatory remark.

“Oh nothing,” he dismissed inconsequentially, “... I just guess

*modesty* isn't a trans-dimensional concept."

"Ha! The human speaks of moralities as if he were some pillar of ethical righteousness. Hypocrisy *indeed*." Luna retorted smartly.

"At least *I'm* wearing pants."

Luna rolled her eyes and continued walking hoping to reach the building rather soon. The night was still young, but even so, Luna felt that the less time they spent in the open, the better.

"Are we there yet?" Dash complained circling lazily around the group.

"Close," Celestia answered for her, "A few more blocks." Celestia herself would admit she was eager to get off the streets. She couldn't shake the eerie feeling of eyes upon them, despite the clearly vacant streets. Flashes of movement in darkened alleyways always seemed to her playing tricks on her, for when she turned to see they appeared quite empty. They could even hear the echoing of far off voices, bouncing through the streets. Most likely just a few ponies out on a stroll, enjoying each others company in the cool night air. Still the voices steeled her resolve to get out of the open as soon as possible.

The rows of office buildings and small businesses came to a rather sudden halt, revealing a large very plain looking building. If anypony had their guess it would have most likely resembled a large warehouse. It certainly looked nothing like a government facility. Apart from the lone guard standing watch outside the small metal door, one might not find anything unusual about the structure at all. It seemed more likely that it were full of plain shipping boxes than highly volatile government secrets. Then again that was kind of the idea. The best place to hide was often right in plain sight.

They crossed the small open lot to the front of the building. The two alicorns were impossible to misidentify, but still, the door remained firmly sealed until ponies on the other side were forewarned of their arrival.

As if by some unseen command, the guard bowed and removed himself from the princess' path.

Celestia nodded her appreciation to the guard and strode up to the door, touching her glowing horn to cold steel. A sharp click could be heard as the door unlocked. The guard took the initiative of taking the knob in his teeth, and with some apparent strain pulled the door open for the princesses.

The now open passageway revealed merely a small, dimly lit stretch of hallway. It was an ominous scene. The hallway was dark, aside from a soft beam of light every dozen feet or so. The end of the hallway was a brightly lit white room.

Celestia looked back at the human to see if he was indeed still willing to follow through with the plan. "Major?" she asked, getting his attention.

"Ladies first," Shane gestured at the door with spurious chivalry.

Celestia nodded, understanding his trepidation. She was the first to step inside, leaving the cool night behind.

~~~~~

Twilight didn't like it in here. The air tasted wrong. It felt sterile, and dry. There was something horribly efficient about this place. Her hooves clicked softly upon the floor, but there was no audible echo that one might normally expect from a long hallway. It was as if any lingering sound were being absorbed into the walls themselves.

She quickened her pace, eager to free herself from the oppressive hallway. She found her place next to the human, who was just as eagerly following the princesses.

They emerged into what looked to be a small lobby. The walls were painted plain white. A few chairs were placed irregularly along the walls, giving it the feeling of a waiting room. There was a small desk, at which a receptionist would monitor the attendance of ponies that came and went. The desk was currently unattended,

however, the receptionist had certainly gone home by now.

The princesses made their way through a second hallway, this one feeling much less oppressive. There were several doors lining the walls, most adorned with nothing more than a tiny gold circle inscribed with a number. They passed each one, paying them little mind. The rest of the building was just as immaculately clean as the front lobby. The walls all looked as if they had been painted just that morning.

The hallway led to a metal staircase, leading down several stories.

Shane stopped and peeked over the metal railing. Twilight appeared at his side to see for herself. The staircase reached down well into the bowels of the earth.

*“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”* Shane mumbled to Twilight. She was unsure what to make of the quote, but apparently he did not expect a response, because he nudged her with an elbow before righting himself, *“It’s not gettin’ any closer. Come on.”*

Twilight’s mind began to wander during the descent down countless flights. The one thing she did notice is that the air seemed to be growing significantly colder, almost to an uncomfortable level. Soon Twilight thought she was able to see her own breath if she caught it in the right light.

They never reached the bottom. The princesses ushered them off the stairs through another set of doors. Twilight wondered how exactly the two alicorns knew where they were going, none of these floors or door were marked, or at least not in any way Twilight could recognize.

The doors led them into lab. White tile covered the floor, and the lower half of the ceiling. Several metal tables filled the room, all covered with an array of science-tastic appliances. It was freezing. Twilight found herself wishing she had brought a scarf.

The back wall of the room was adorned with a glass pane, through which could be seen several racks of white chemical filtration suits. The door leading to the room was painted up in vibrant black and

yellow stripes.

A flash of movement in the window caught Twilight's attention. One of the chemical suits was moving. It took her a split second to realize there was a pony inside. Twilight couldn't get any decent look at her face. The suit covered her entire head, except for the clear visor across her eyes. She was a unicorn, Twilight could tell that much, and her eyes were a hard, crystalline purple.

Celestia moved to the window and tapped lightly on the glass.

That seemed to catch the pony's attention. She turned and beheld the newly arrived group. She looked frantically at a clock that adorned the wall. Apparently she had lost track of the time. She moved quickly into a small chemical shower that sprayed the outside of her suit in smoky disinfectant gas.

Once the suit no longer harbored any unwanted germs, she made her way over to her side of the sealed, striped door.

A small hiss sounded as she opened the door to greet the princess and her guests.

The still fully suited pony stepped through the door, bowing to the Princesses. She righted herself, the headpiece of the suit glowed a shimmering purple, and lifting itself off the pony's head.

She was a pale coated unicorn, with a long purple mane that flowed back around her head, streaks of soft grey shot through her locks. Twilight wondered at them, she still appeared quite young. Her horn appeared to have been filed to a point, a trend Twilight never fully understood.

"Hello, Ms. Haze." Celestia offered warmly.

"Princess," she bowed again, "I apologize. I misjudged the time. I did not expect you so soon."

Celestia waved a hoof dismissively, "If anything I should be apologizing to you. Thank you again for staying so late. I'm sure you would rather be elsewhere."

“Not at all, I would most likely be here anyway. This is quite exciting.” The young mare spoke with a slight accent. Twilight couldn’t place a hoof on it exactly, but she did not sound like she had been born in Equestria.

Celestia turned, “I’d like to introduce Ms. Amethyst Haze. She’s been spearheading our medical operations here for the past few weeks.”

Twilight’s ears perked at the name.

“Hi!” Pinkie Pie waved enthusiastically.

The pale pony nodded at the group, noticing the human for the first time. Her eyebrow cocked, “So it’s true then?” She moved toward the human, who eyed her cautiously, unsure what to make of this new pony, “You survived,” her voice was both amazed and detached. She took a step toward him in a slightly familiar way.

He took a step back, indicating that he was perfectly comfortable with their current distance.

She withdrew a bit, “Forgive me. The last time I saw you, you were... less whole,” she spoke with a hint of unpleasant nostalgia. “I am glad you survived. We haven’t received any updates down here for the past few days. I assumed you were dead.”

“I’m sorry for not sending word, but he has... kept us rather *busy*,” Celestia explained.

“I can imagine. It’s strange to see one up and moving,” she noted to Celestia absent mindedly, “I thought they would be slightly more awkward, having only the two legs, but they seem quite well balanced.”

“Ms. Haze, I do not mean to be rude, but we have a very limited amount of time. I believe you know why he is here.” Luna interjected.

She became slightly somber, looking at the human, who was busy displaying as little emotion as possible. He had his mask back on. “Yes,” she nodded sadly, “Of course. Please follow me.” Her words



directed at Shane. She moved to the door she had come through, pushing it open with a bit of magic.

He followed at a few paces, Twilight went in directly behind him. Celestia and Luna were next, followed by the rest of the girls. The room was apparently just a staging area. There were several racks of chemical filtration suits, and two adjoining chemical showers.

On the last wall was a door, silver and decorated with countless flashy biohazard stickers and emergency procedure directions.

Amethyst Haze turned and began to speak, "They are in there. But I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to step under one of these nozzles. The spray should kill any germs you may have brought in with-"

*\*PPSSSSSSSSSSSS\**

The sound cut off Amethyst's speech, drawing everypony's attention. The human had completely ignored Amethyst and her spray, choosing instead to pop the hatch on the door himself.

"No!" she shouted, alarmed, "You can't do that! Don't go in there." She was moving through the group very ready to detain the human herself before Luna held a wing to block her path, causing her to swear softly to herself. It was too late anyway. He was already moving through the door.

The rest of the girls seemed slightly stunned, unsure of what to do. Pinkie Pie had somehow managed to squeeze into a filtration suit when nopony was looking, pink tufts of mane poofed out from under the edges of the head cover.

Celestia moved inside after the human. She had little concern for germs, painfully immortal as she was, sickness often did nothing but prove to be horrible inconveniences.

The room was darker than the last and freezing cold, their breath producing swirling little clouds. The far wall as covered in what looked like several square refrigerator doors. This room was entirely white tile, even the ceiling, except for the occasional fluorescent

light.

There was a single row of stainless steel tables. On each one was a long sheet of white plastic, covering something that greatly resembled the shape of motionless humans.

There were ten, each roughly similar in size. Celestia had seen them before, secretly hoping she wouldn't have to again.

Shane was stopped dead in his tracks, a few paces into the room. His arms hung limply at his side, as he beheld the scene.

Celestia's heart wrenched with shared sympathy.

He ran his hands through his cropped mane a few times before he laced his fingers behind his neck, apparently unsure what to do with them as he processed what his eyes were telling him.

"Jesus," he breathed. He shook his head slowly, seeming suddenly annoyed. "You fuckin' assholes," he chastised the room of dead men.

Amethyst Haze finally came through the doors after them, followed closely by Twilight, Rarity, Rainbow Dash and the rest, all reeking of disinfectant.

They all stopped upon seeing the human, becoming very quiet and unassuming.

If he noticed the new arrivals, he showed no sign of it. He took a few halting steps toward the tables.

He came to the first. It was a fair bit larger than the others. With a deliberately slow movement he peeled back the white plastic covering the head. The dead human was the sickly grey pale color of death. The bulky dead man had jet black hair. Shane stared at him coldly for a few moments, before covering his face back up and moving to the next body. The next human was tall and had no hair on his head at all. He appeared much older than Shane, but Celestia could only speculate. Shane left this human's head uncovered as he moved to the next, a man with a mane that was almost completely grey.

Shane moved down the line, taking less and less time identifying each one.

One in particular seemed to catch his attention though. It was a slightly more slender human. He was taller, sort of lanky. Shane swallowed hard and knelt down by the table. He looked over at the ponies all watching him carefully, before returning his attention to the corpse.

"I guess you win," he said to the dead man. The words choked out barely above a whisper. Celestia had to strain to hear. Even as she did she felt slightly guilty. She felt like she was eavesdropping on private conversation. The human looked as if he suddenly remembered something important. He began frantically tapping all his pockets, searching for something. He stood, shuffling over to Celestia apprehensively.

His mouth looked like it was trying to form words, as if suddenly unsure how to communicate. He cleared his throat awkwardly, "... I need to borrow like fifty bucks," he muttered, self-consciously.

Celestia took a moment to process the bizarre request, "What?"

He hung his head, embarrassed, "It's from... before..." he attempted to explain clearly having a hard time of it, "I lost because he was right and... I never paid him. I can't..."

"It's alright, Major. I understand." she lied, but she did not wish to see him suffer through the touchy explanation.

Rarity stepped forward, producing a shiny gold bit, "I'm afraid I've lost my human-equestrian exchange rate card." she teased slightly.

The human gave her a sad half grin, as she levitated the bit into his hand. He turned the piece over on his palm, "Is this gold?" he asked flatly.

"Yes. Is it enough?"

He snorted as if the question were absurd. "... Yeah. It's enough." He stared at the gold coin intently, like it might vanish.

He turned and walked back to where his friend lay, exactly where he had left him.

Shane grabbed the man's stiff arm, pressing the gold bit into his palm and closing the cold dead fingers around the yellow coin.

"There. Now you can rot in hell knowing I don't owe you shit."

Celestia decided that human friendship was a strange and complicated thing.

Shane placed a hand on the dead man's forehead, and choked out a whisper, "Save me a seat, brother." He stood up and replaced the plastic covering over the body.

He continued down the line, identifying the remains of each of his fallen crewmates. Many were difficult to see, one in particular made Rarity step out of the room, he didn't seem to care.

He reached the end of the row, stopping as if he had been stung. Celestia's gut wrenched as she noticed what escaped her attention before.

There was an eleventh table. The stainless steel alter was barren. She felt like hiding. It was probably the worst possible way to add insult to injury, at the worst imaginable time. She prayed that he did not assume they had done it intentionally.

He took grave steps toward the table meant for him, placing a hand on the icy metal surface.

Celestia shot Amethyst Haze a pained questioning look.

Amethyst tucked her ears back, "We were told to expect eleven," she offered quietly as explanation.

The human did not appear outwardly offended. He just seemed fascinated by the empty table. He turned and sat on it, swiveling on his rear until he lay lengthwise upon the cold steel rectangle. He checked on the corpse to his right, doing his best to imitate the same position the others were in, and stared at the ceiling.

He lay there for several moments, only the white cloud of icy vapor from his breath betraying life.

Celestia exchanged uneasy looks with her sister. The charade did not seem very healthy. Luna took the first few hesitant steps toward Shane who was too busy playing dead to really acknowledge her.

She came to his side, he continued to ignore her, apparently committed to the act. Luna nudged him on the shoulder with her muzzle. He swiveled his head to look at the alicorn. She offered him a sad concerned smile.

He swallowed and nodded, "Yeah." he said quietly without prompting. He sat up and turned, hopping off the table.

He took a deep breath and looked back at the man he left uncovered; the older bald human. He turned to the end of the room and made his way over to a countertop, which included several drawers. He popped open several, examining their contents as if searching for something.

"What are you doing?" Luna asked, carefully.

He stopped, and looked at the assembled ponies, before continuing to scour the contents of various drawers, "Everyone leave," he ordered coldly.

"What?"

"Get out." He answered, but not cruelly.

"Like... leave the room?" Twilight asked confused. "Why?"

He sighed, annoyed as he apparently found what he was looking for, "Stay if you want," he offered as he pulled a silver scalpel from the drawer, "But it's for your own sake that I strongly advise you to step out for this." He walked over to the balding man that remained uncovered.

Celestia's gut tightened and she turned and nodded to the group. Amethyst Haze began to usher the mares out of the room, looking none too happy about whatever Shane was planning.

Luna followed the group out as well.

Celestia stayed, earning a cocked eyebrow from Shane, “Your choice,” he muttered.

He placed the scalpel on the table next to the bald man. He hooked an arm under the corpse and flipped him over onto his stomach. He took a deep breath in through his nose and out his mouth.

He plucked the scalpel off the table and pressed the blade against the base of the bald man’s skull.

The polished silver razor cut through the dead man’s flesh with terrible ease. The corpse offered no sign of care.

Shane stopped cutting once he reached the back of the neck. The long score didn’t bleed. The corpse was too long dead.

Shane pulled on the edges of the incision before closing his eyes and taking another deep breath, mentally preparing himself. He stuck his thumb and index finger into the incision, probing for something Celestia did not know.

She was doing her best not to gag at the squelching sounds. In hindsight she was rather glad he told the girls to leave.

A muted snap came from the neck of the dead man, similar to that of a twig breaking, and Shane pulled out a small black square, no bigger than a shirt button, thickly covered in gore.

Celestia did not ask what the implanted square was. She was not entirely sure she wanted to know.

Shane dropped the scalpel, letting it fall to the steel table with a small clatter. He lifted the small black chip up to the light, holding as one might a robin’s egg; reverently, but firmly enough to ensure he would not drop it. He stared at it, uneasy determination in his eyes.

He walked quickly over to a small basin in the countertop. He turned a nozzle and water began to flow from the faucet. He rinsed the black square free of blood and tucked in his pocket, making sure

to scrub his hands thoroughly, before flicking his wrists in an attempt to dry them. He eventually settled on wiping them on his trousers. He made sure to cover the man back up with his plastic sheet. Before making for the door next to which stood Celestia.

He paused by the white alicorn, took one brief look over his shoulder, then straightened himself, “Burn em.”

He pushed through the door and exited the room without a backward glance.

~~~~~

## **Author's Notes:**

I'd like to take a bit of this time to answer some of the most common emails I get.

~~~~~

**~“How often do you post chapters? When will the next one be ready?”~**

- I do not have a set schedule for the release of chapters. Sorry but my schedule is dictated to me. I have little say in it. I work on the chapters whenever I have some free time but that's few and far between.

**~“How far into the future is this set?”~**

- I have yet to pick an actual date for my fic. It is set in the near future. No more than 50 years. No less than 20. But idk. This is just my headcanon for my own story. You can pretend it's whatever you want.

**~“Are you working with KKat on a side story?”~**

- I hate to break it to you guys but I haven't heard

anything from Kkat in a few months.

She mentioned maybe wanting to write a side story of A2.

Haven't really heard from her since.

I know (...she's?) super busy, She probably just lost interest. Which is cool.

I barely have time to handle my own stuff much less write with other authors.

Regardless there will always be a spot for her here if she ever has time, I'd love to get the chance to work with her.

Also I apologize to anyone who emailed me a question and did not receive an answer. That usually means that your question is something I am going to cover in later chapters.

...and to whoever keeps sending me emails in russian or whatever.....I STILL don't speak Russian. Please stop emailing me in Russian.



# ARTICLE 2 Part VIII

## ARTICLE 2

### Part VIII

By: Muppetz (!Gsih3Wfnlk)

~~~~~

Twilight was being rushed out by a very unhappy Amethyst Haze. Twilight understood her frustration; she hated it when somepony interfered with her studies, namely Spike, but it seemed to be more than that. Maybe the alien with a razor knife loose in her lab may have had something to do with it. Who knows for sure?

The group retreated out through the changing room and into the main laboratory. Most of the girls took to awkwardly standing around, shuffling here or there aimlessly. This wasn't how they expected this to go. Granted, none of them knew what to expect in the first place.

Twilight trotted over to Amethyst Haze, who was busy staring apprehensively at the half open door leading back to the morgue.

"Excuse me," Twilight began slowly, quite certain she was about to make a fool of herself, "but you aren't... *the* Amethyst Haze are you?"

Twilight winced, fully expecting the pale unicorn to burst into laughter at the question. No laughter came.

Twilight cracked open an eye only to find Amethyst wearing an amused smile. "Impressive," she replied in her strange accent, "I did not believe any remnants of my story still remained."

Twilight's jaw hung open slightly, "You're her, aren't you?" she breathed. "That can't be possible, that would mean you would be... over two hundred years old!"

"Many strange things wander this land, no?" Amethyst smiled.

"Welcome to the club," Luna remarked, "You wouldn't believe how difficult she was to track down." Luna mused, shifting her words to Twilight. "I must admit I did not expect to actually find anypony, but as the situation with the human grew desperate, we were forced to resort to more... *unconventional* avenues."

"Like chasing old pony tales?" Amethyst teased.

"It wouldn't be the first time an *old pony tale* turned out to be true." Luna winked furtively at Twilight.

"I must admit that I sometimes close my eyes and feel as though I am still trapped in my wooded prison. I am in your debt, highness."

"After all you've done, Ms. Haze, consider that debt paid in full, with interest."

A small shuffling caught their attention. Pinkie Pie was curiously riffling through some folders she found on one of the tabletops.

The door to the morgue was pushed open and from strode a grim faced Major Doran, followed by very disturbed looking Celestia. Oddly enough, her snow white coat seemed just a bit paler than usual.

Shane once again chose to forgo the chemical showers, instead throwing open the door to the lab and taking long strides toward the exit. "We're done here," he curtailed with a small circular swish of the finger. "Let's go." His voice was grave, and he was clearly in a hurry to leave.

"Ooh what are these?" Pinkie asked excitedly spilling folder full of tiny square photographs. What were you taking pictur-"

Pinkie stopped mid sentence, her pink face suddenly flushed with a sickly green. She cupped a hoof over her mouth and staggered away from the table clearly disturbed by whatever was in the file.

"Autopsy photos," Amethyst explained.

Shane froze immediately upon hearing the words leave Amethyst's mouth. He shut his eyes for a moment with an irritated sigh.

He stalked over to the pile of papers and photos, which Pinkie Pie was studiously avoiding the sight of. He swished a hand across the pile, spreading the photos in a wide arc along the table.

He studied them for a few moments with detached curiosity.

Amethyst Haze joined him somewhat guiltily. "I apologize. I was merely trying to be thorough."

"It's ok," he barely whispered, taking a deep breath, "You get a good look?" he asked pointing at the photos.

"Um... yes. I've studied them several times. Why?" she played along, confused.

"Good. They're coming with me." He began scooping up the photos, any nearby documents. He jammed them all back into a folder. He tucked the folder under one arm and began collecting any piece of paper within reach with the other.

"Hey! No, no, no! Wait! What are you doing?!"

"I can't let you keep this stuff," he said, still grabbing folders and files, paying little attention to whatever lay inside them.

"This is all my research! You can't just take it!" she asserted.

"Major, surely there must be something we could work out?" Luna intervened hopefully.

"This is non-negotiable. I apologize for any inconvenience, but this research was conducted without the permission of the U.S. government, and I will be confiscating it. End of story. If you would like to plead your case, feel free to contact the Department of Defense's Division of Extra-Universal Affairs, but I'll warn you, their response time is spotty at best, mainly due to the fact that it doesn't exist and I made it up just now."

He had already massed a hefty stack of papers and folders, while

Amethyst Haze stared daggers into him.

Twilight sympathized with the pale mare. She had once lost weeks worth of research when Spike came down with the hiccups. The loss almost brought her to tears. But at least *that* was an accident; Amethyst's work was being forcibly taken from her.

"Is there any more?" he asked, nearly buckling under the bundle as it was.

"No," she replied automatically.

He fixed her with a flat calculating stare for several seconds.

She sighed and cursed lightly under her breath. Her horn lit with her trademark purple haze, opening a drawer across the room. Another hefty stack of files floated their way over to the human's already teetering tower of papers.

"Alright then," he voiced cheerily, which sounded highly unusual for him. "Now *all* relevant materials have been collected and remanded into my custody, yes?" he directed toward Amethyst.

"Yes," she growled through her teeth.

"Excellent... *Unfortunately*, I'm afraid I am not able to provide sufficient care for said materials at present." He stopped and took in a full circle view of the room. "This facility appears sufficiently secure." He returned his attention to Amethyst who was eyeing him curiously, wondering what he was playing at. "As these materials may contain some items of value to both myself and foreign parties I have decided to forgo destroying them, in favor of relegating them into your care. Is this agreeable to you?"

"... yes," Amethyst said with a slowly growing grin as she realized what he was doing.

"Are you willing to accept responsibility of said materials on behalf of the United States Government until such a time at which an official is able to properly relieve you of them?"

"I am,"

“Terrific!” He plopped the enormous stack of papers back down on the steel table. “Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Haze. We look forward to working with you in the future.” He flashed an amiable smile, which she returned.

Shane turned to Celestia and Luna who were both grinning at the human’s rather practiced use of loopholes. “We good to go? Super. Let’s move.” He ordered without waiting for any answers before making a heading for the exit.

Luna shot a puff of air out of her nostrils and shook her head, amused. “*Humans*,” she summed up as if the word explained all the strangeness of the event.

~~~~~

Celestia cracked the door open and peeked an eye out. *It should be here by now*, she thought to herself. She sent the summons almost ten minutes ago.

Celestia closed the door, resigning herself to wait. It shouldn’t be too much longer. She went back to the group who were all seated in the long dim hallway they had first entered.

Shane was sitting next to Twilight on the floor, leaning against the wall looking disinterested. He leaned his head against the concrete wall as he drummed his fingers on his knees.

Celestia sat next to him. He didn’t seem to mind. “You okay?” she asked familiarly.

“Yeah,” he answered after a deep sigh. He scratched at his chin, awkwardly, before quietly adding, “Thank you.” Celestia looked at him, curiously lifting an eyebrow. “... you know... for doing all this,” he explained.

Celestia smiled sadly, “You’re welcome. I wish I could say I was happy to do so.”

“You could’ve said no.”

“Why would I have done that?”

"I would have," he admitted with a shrug.

Celestia chuckled, "I am not you." That earned Celestia a twisted smile. "I suppose I should thank you as well."

"What for?"

"Saving Amethyst's research. I may be mistaken but I think you may have been bending some of your rules to do so."

He shrugged, "Probably, but once again, procedure manuals tended to make rules specific to my physical universe. But I'm not in *my* universe anymore. So I'm kinda making it up as I go. Destroying it would have been the safer option, but... why bother? It's not like you couldn't just start over. I could've destroyed it for the sake of a technicality, but contrary to popular belief I am rarely a dick just for no reason."

"Could have fooled me," Luna teased from down the hall.

"Ouch," he sighed in mock offense. "Besides, I wasn't about to go carrying all that shit up those stairs."

Celestia chuckled. "Still, thank you."

"Don't mention it."

A noticeable rapping came from the exit door, as the guard outside signaled the Princesses their carriage had arrived. Celestia stood, prodding Shane with a hoof to get him up, which he did with a groan.

"Where is this place, again?" Shane asked.

"A few miles outside the city," Luna explained, "We appropriated the Wonderbolts' old hangar. It was large enough to store the wreckage and well away from prying eyes."

"What's a wonderbolt?" he asked confused.

"WHAT!?" Dash jolted from the rear of the group. "You've never heard of the Wonderbolts!?"

“Here we go,” Applejack groaned,

“I’m not from around here,” he reminded patronizingly.

“They’re only the greatest team of flyers ever to exist EVER!!”

“Okaaay. Keep your panties on. *Jesus.*”

Luna pushed open the door, the formerly empty streets now occupied by the princess’ royal carriage, complete with team of pegasus stallions.

“Come along everypony. If we hurry we should be able to make it back before sunrise.”

“How is this discrete?” He asked dubiously, as they began to file out of the building toward the carriage. “Won’t people notice if they see us parading down the street in an oversized cliché?”

“We aren’t going to use the streets.”

“Then how are we getting there?”

The corners of Luna’s mouth lifted

~~~~~

“Breath, Shane.” Twilight suggested comfortingly.

The human was curled into as tight a ball as he could possibly muster in the back of Celestia’s Sky Carriage of Awesomness™ trying desperately not to be sick. He clearly had never flown in a carriage before. It was funny, in a rather mean way. Twilight had to actively try not to giggle at the scene. His eyes were shut tight, and he hugged a bunch of Celestia’s billowing tail to his chest as a drowning colt might cling to a life preserver.

“You can open your eyes if you like, Major. The view is lovely,” Celestia tried.

He violently shook his head; unwilling to move.

“It’s perfectly safe, I promise.”

“It’s a floating platform with no walls or seatbelts. It’s absolutely NOT safe, it’s a *deathtrap* and I want off!”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Luna teased. “We’re almost there. You act like you’ve never flown before.”

“I *have* flown before. In planes and helicopters; things that are SUPPOSED to fly. *This* is a CARRIAGE. It was NEVER meant to leave the ground!”

“That may be true where you come from, Major, but we do things differently here,” Luna explained.

“Well ‘*here*’ sucks!” he shouted back, still clutching to Celestia’s billowing tail for dear life.

Luna trotted to the edge and stomped lightly, causing the whole carriage to pitch.

Shane gripped the edge of the carriage with white knuckle force, somehow pressing himself closer to the floor than he already was. “I hate you so much right now,” he informed the Lunar princess through gritted teeth.

Luna smiled back at him innocently. “Turbulence,” Luna blamed still smiling.

“I want off.”

“Feel free to jump,” Luna offered.

“You first,” he quipped back.

“That’s enough, you two,” Celestia interrupted. “We’re close.”

Everypony looked toward the horizon. The moon was barely enough to light the valley. They soared between two monolithic ridges. Ancient rivers had carved a pass through the rolling mountains. The canyon was perfect for the Wonderbolts. The mountains on either side protected from the worst of the elements,



allowing them to practice their stunts without the worry of dangerous crosswinds or updrafts. The only drawback was its rather inconvenient distance from the capitol. When construction on their new headquarters finished, this facility became largely abandoned. They sometimes still used the facility for recruit training drills, but otherwise it remained empty.

The transportation of the recovered wreckage had proven difficult, but a few clever unicorns managed the task quite successfully.

The princess' carriage banked around a bend, and the lights from the hanger could be seen through the darkness. Several white lights lined a small landing pad on the roof.

Celestia's guards alighted delicately upon the roof of the hangar.

The very second the carriage landed Shane began to eagerly untangle himself from Celestia's tail and threw himself over the side, hitting the deck with a very undignified thud.

The rest of the party disembarked much more gracefully.

Applejack trotted over to the prone human. He was still embracing the floor with unbridled relief.

"Ya'll right, sugarcube?" she asked with a small laugh.

He held up a thumb.

She laughed and poked him with a hoof. "C'mon now, it weren't that bad."

He shrugged away from her prodding hoof. He took a deep breath and gently slapped himself on the cheek a few times. He pushed himself to his feet and cracking his neck, causing Twilight to shudder in annoyance. "Alright," he breathed, "I'm good."

"So like I was saying," Dash started, landing next to Shane, "Then there was Tradewind. She was the *third* Captain of the Wonderbolts. She was supposedly the one that actually *patented* the Reverse Fire Flash. Ever since, only ten other ponies have ever been able to do it!" she gibbered excitedly. Rainbow polished a hoof against her

coat, proudly. "I'm pretty close to doing it myself. Just few more tweaks and I'll have it nailed."

"...cool," he deadpanned, not even bothering to try and sound interested. She didn't seem to notice though, and continued weaving for him the complete historical tale of the Wonderbolts, and every obscure detail that allowed.

The soft echoing of hoofs on metal stairs rang in the night, attracting everypony's attention.

Across the empty roof, the soft glow of a lantern pierced through the darkness. The dim yellow lantern light bobbed toward them. The pony that carried the lantern was hardly visible. He was a dark green pegasus stallion with a rusty brown mane.

He approached the group, setting down the lantern, and bowing to the Princesses. "Highness," he greeted, casting uneasy glances at Shane who still seemed a bit queasy. "Welcome. My name is Chaser. We heard you would be coming. I assume you would like to personally oversee our progress."

"Something like that, yes." Celestia answered, remaining intentionally vague.

"Very well. If you'll please follow me, I'd be happy to show you the way."

The staircase led down along the outside wall of the hangar. The hangar itself was an enormous rectangular building. The three story high structure had massive doors which could slide in and out of place to seal the hangars shut. The doors alone were taller than Twilight's library and longer than hoofball field in length.

The forest green pony led the group along the outer walls of the facility. Rather than walk all the way to the front to enter through the large hanger opening, he led them to a more adequately sized side entrance. No guards stood watch outside the door, nor did it seem to be protected by any magical spell Twilight could recognize, for the green stallion pushed it open without hesitation. He wedged a hoof into the base of the door, propping it open and gesturing

with a hoof for his party to enter.

Celestia smiled gratefully and stepped inside. A gentle nudge from Twilight prompted Shane to enter next. Twilight followed close behind him, not keen on letting him out of her sight.

“I’ve heard about this place.” Rainbow Dash said in a strangely reverent tone. “I never thought I would actually get to see it. I mean...this is where the Wonderbolts were *born*.” Rainbow landed softly before squeeing happily and prancing inside the door, joining the others.

The massive hangar was bigger than Twilight expected. It seemed to stretch on forever. The far walls were barely even visible. However, it wasn’t the dimensions of the building that commanded her attention. The hangar was full of unicorns in lab coats, hustling back and forth from ad-hoc stations set up all over the hangar. White tents were pitched here and there, hermetically sealed in protective plastic bubbles. Tables laden with microscopes and petri dishes and all manner of scientific equipment dotted the area. Massive power cables snaked their way throughout the facility.

The center of the room was the massive pile of wreckage. The broken vehicle hardly looked anything like a ship, more so a mountain of twisted steel. The charred steel exoskeleton that made up the exterior of the ship was bent and rippled from the sheer force of the impact. The ship itself seemed to be split into two. Twilight was not sure if that was due to the damage in the crash or if it had been done so that the behemoth would fit through the hangar doors. Several unicorns surrounded the broken vessel, some wielding blow-torches, busily cutting sections of the ship’s exterior off for study. Others were merely taking careful notes or running their own magical tests. A few brave souls clad in respirator suits dared to enter the vessel through a hole that had been cut in the top. Many were hauling out piles of equipment or mechanical devices, anything that they felt warranted study. The alien devices were sorted and sent off to various tables for examination. Most of the unicorns seemed too busy to take notice of the new arrivals.

“Princess!” An excited voice echoed across the room, drawing their attention to an ash-grey pegasus with a charcoal mane. He raced

toward them, landing a few yards away. He pushed a set of goggles up unto his forehead and beamed; sweeping a hoof across his chest in a hasty bow, to which the princess inclined her head in return. “Welcome. You’ve arrived at a very exciting time! We’re right in the middle of several major breakthroughs!” His enthusiasm was evidence enough.

Twilight noticed the pegasus’ fur was singed in places and he seemed to be smoking slightly.

“It’s nice to finally have some good news,” Celestia said with a smile. “I apologize for not being able to oversee the project myself, but you seem to be handling it quite well.”

“Thank you, highness. It’s a true honor to be here. The things I’ve learned are...*astounding*. Some of these technologies are infinitely more advanced than anything I have ever encountered. This is...a whole new level of technology.”

“Well if anypony can figure them out it’s you. You were not selected for this arbitrarily.”

“Thank you, Princess. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” she assured.

“Goodness, where are my manners?” he started as he noticed the group behind Celestia. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Doctor Cornelius Bolt. I’ve been overseeing the recovery project here for the passed few weeks.

“I know you,” Twilight began. “You’re the Director of the Ministry of Technology, aren’t you?”

Bolt smiled, “Impressive, I usually tend to work behind the scenes.”

“You were a guest speaker for one my classes at the university. You gave a lecture on the corporatization of cloud-based mechanical engineering.”

“I can see why you’ve chosen her as your pupil, highness. Not many students manage to stay awake during my lectures,” he noted with

a chuckle.

"I thought it was very informative," Twilight said earnestly.

"You are too kind. But I doubt you came to hear about my university days, especially when there is a bit of an elephant in the room, so to speak." He nodded toward the alien vessel parked in the center of the hangar. "It took quite some time to move the wreckage in its entirety so we've only recently been able to begin our analyses in earnest, but we've already learned a lot. It's very exciting! If you'd like I would be honored to sho..." he stopped in mid sentence as he apparently took notice of the human in the group. "Oh my. What have we here?" He flapped gently into the air coming to a hover in front of Shane, scratching his chin with a hoof. "Hello, I don't believe I've ever met one of you before. Where are you from exactly?"

Shane didn't answer outright. Instead he merely raised his arm, pointing a finger at the broken ship in the center of the hangar.

Bolt looked back and forth between the human and the wreckage a few times. His eyes steadily widened as realization dawned upon him. "Could it be true?"

"Director," Celestia began, "I'd like you to meet Major Shane Doran."

"Of course! Welcome, Major!" He beamed with excitement. "My goodness, I didn't think it was possible. I mean, just from looking at the level of damage I never imagined anypony could have...well ... lived. I have so many questions for you. You might just be the key to piecing this all together," he was practically bouncing with excitement. "Please come with me. The sooner we get started the better."

He motioned toward the pile of wreckage, beckoning the group to follow. Twilight followed close behind him, Shane in tow. They got closer many of the unicorns stopped their work to gawk at the strange bipedal creature.

"Here we are," Bolt began, "The main attraction. It's impressive, but

I'm afraid it's been so badly damaged that it's not much more than a metal shell anymore. Most of the complicated machinery was destroyed or too dangerous to transport. We were still able to map out a decent picture of what it may have looked like whole."

"What are they doing?" Shane finally spoke, pointing at all the unicorns darting to and fro about the ship.

"Data retrieval, mostly. We've been taking a few samples. We salvaged what we could."

"Clear them out," Shane ordered dryly.

"I'm sorry, what?" Bolt asked, confused.

*"Make all these ponies go away,"* he clarified, annoyed.

Bolt seemed puzzled but he didn't object. He shouted a few orders to all the unicorns working around the wreckage, and without hesitation they all began to disperse.

"What are you planning?" Twilight asked Shane sounding worried.

"I'm gonna go inside, and try to find my stuff." he stated simply.

"Why? You wanna come?"

"Yes!" She answered immediately, throwing Shane off guard.

Apparently he wasn't expecting that response. Twilight on the other hoof was more than eager to get a closer look at the human vessel. Even in its broken state she would love to get a look at the inside.

"No, get everypony out," Bolt barked at one of the nearby unicorns. "Clear the inside as well...I don't care just tell them to take five or something. But I need this place sealed off for a bit....Don't worry about why, just do it."

After the last few ponies emerged from the bowels of the ship in an agitated huff, Shane made his way up to the craft, Twilight directly behind. The actual entrance to the ship was an airlock hatch on the other side near the cockpit, but the vessel was so large neither Shane nor Twilight would be able to reach it, so they made their way to one of the large gashes on the outer shell of the ship. It was

large enough for them both to fit through. But still quite a few feet off the ground.

Shane jumped up and pulled himself through first, careful to avoid the sharp edges of the torn metal. Once through, he turned and offered a hand to Twilight. She was grateful for the help. She was, after all, a bit shorter. She stood on her hind legs and reached up toward the proffered hand. Shane leaned out and grabbed onto the lavender mare's hoof and with little trouble, plucked her off the ground and pulled her through the rent in the side of the ship.

Once through, Twilight took view of the inside. It was dark. Twilight's eyes took a moment to adjust. They were in some sort of tubular passageway, either side ending in circular hatches. Twilight's horn began to glow softly, casting a violet glow on the walls, giving them just enough light to see by.

"This way," Shane said making his way down one end of the passageway. Twilight followed. Evidence of damage was everywhere. Wires and pipes jutted from the walls, the plastic side tiles were cracked or missing, revealing bundles of circuitry and dead machines.

They reached the end of the short tubular passageway. Shane pulled a large yellow lever and the door swung open, squeaking slightly. He ducked his head and stepped through, Twilight stepping directly behind, the light from her horn now the only illumination in the ship.

"Where are we going?" Twilight asked.

"Cargo bay," Shane answered, "It's somewhere near the back, just don't wander off."

Twilight had absolutely no intention of doing so. The interior of the ship was oppressive and pitch black. Fascinating as it was, she was eager to get back out into the open.

"How long were you stuck in this thing?" Twilight asked.

"Before we jumped? We were sitting in orbit, on standby, for about

a week. They had to PMCS the thing like *eight million* times. Then we just sat around while they ran system checks for like two days.” He ducked under a snapped metal beam. “Fat lotta’ fucking good it did.”

She followed Shane closely through the ship. They were continually forced to maneuver around wreckage and debris, but they reached the cargo bay without too much difficulty. The unicorns must have cleared away most of the obstructions when they were scavenging the ship. The cargo bay itself was fairly empty, and seemed to be one of the most intact rooms. Being near the back of the ship, it must have been spared the brunt of the impact. Several large olive drab shipping containers lay on their side, emptied of whatever contents had once been inside them. The scientists must have decided that they held something interesting because the containers were picked clean. “Looks like your friends were already here.” Shane noted. “Better not have touched my stuff,” he muttered to himself.

Shane directed Twilight toward a bulkhead covered from end to end in black wall lockers. He passed over most of them, stopping at one marked with the number forty-seven in silver numbers. The locker door was bent inward, apparently something slammed into it during the crash. The latch was jammed sideways wedging the door closed. He pulled on the broken handle experimentally, but it didn’t budge. “...awesome,” he muttered angrily.

He looked around the floor. A broken steel bar grabbed his attention. He scooped it up and jammed the sharp end of the pole into the broken handle and began to pry it open. With some strain and one final jerk, the handle broke off with a loud metallic ping.

He discarded the steel bar and opened the locker. First he pulled out a large olive-green sea bag, tossing it behind him with a soft thump. He pulled out another bag. This one was some sort of backpack. The pack was coyote-tan and by the look of it, empty. There were more straps and buckles than Twilight could possibly imagine a use for. The exterior of the pack was almost entirely covered in pals webbing, and two velcro patches adorned the front, one was a flag she did not recognize, the other was a nametape reading “U.S. MARINES”.



He threw the pack on his back and tossed the green duffle bag over a shoulder. "Ready? Or did you wanna explore some more?" he teased.

"No. I think I'm quite ready to leave. There's nothing left in here anyway. Anything worth studying has probably been scooped out."

Shane chuckled at her apparent discomfort. He hefted the bags on his back and headed back out the hatch through which they came. They quickly retraced the path to the exit.

Once there Shane tossed both his bags out the hole in the side of the ship, allowing them to fall to the hangar deck. He quickly followed suit, jumping off the edge and down to the ground. He turned and waited for Twilight, who was eyeing the drop uncertainly. It looked much higher from up here.

"You got it?" he asked, amused.

"Yes. *Thank you*," she defended. She jumped and immediately tripped on the edge of the jagged entrance. With a small yelp she fell the good six or seven foot drop to the deck below. Luckily she landed on Shane's green duffle bag, which cushioned her fall somewhat. It still wasn't exactly a soft landing.

"Smooth," Shane teased as he picked Twilight up and setting her on her hooves. She dusted herself off, and Shane shouldered his bags.

Most of the others had dispersed. Luna was off with Bolt at one of the stations. Piles of wires and electronics seemed to be their focus.

Celestia and Applejack were inspecting a large pyramid of alien cargo boxes. One of which was open, revealing several sealed brown plastic bags. Celestia scrutinized one, turning it around and carefully reading the tiny black wording that was printed on the outside of the bag. Most of the lettering was too small for Twilight to see from this distance. The only part she could make out was 'MRE' in bold across the front of the package. She could go study them for herself later.

Rainbow Dash was nowhere in sight. Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie were

watching a group of scientists analyze various alien artifacts through a clear plastic window in the side of one of the tents.

Shane scanned the hangar for a few moments.

“What are you doing?” Twilight finally asked.

“Shopping,” he answered simply.

Twilight was just about to ask what he meant but he grabbed his pack and set off towards Luna.

~~~~~

The young stallion’s breath came in heaves. His hooves echoed off the walls of the vacant Canterlot streets. No pony was ever out this late...or so he would have thought.

He hadn’t stopped running since it happened. He galloped up to the apartment complex and barreled through the doors, not even slowing to say hello to the doorpony. He hurtled up the stairs, skipping every other step, and doing his best to ignore the burning pain in his legs and lungs. Living on the fifth floor didn’t help. He just had to make it home.

He sprinted down the hallway, his camera bouncing wildly around his neck. He skidded to a halt in front of his apartment, swearing under his breath as he fumbled with the large brass key. He jammed it into the lock, giving it a good twist before barging through and slamming it shut behind him. He leaned himself against the door, still breathing heavily, as he locked every single bolt into place. He even darted to his kitchen nabbing a chair and bracing it under the handle.

Once satisfied that no unwelcome visitors would be coming through the door, he finally stopped to catch his breath. He clutched his camera to his chest, clinging to it as if it might disappear at any moment. He made his way to a room in the back of his apartment, shutting the door behind him. He was instantly surrounded by inky blackness. No trace of light existed in this room. He fumbled along the walls with his still shaking hooves, soon finding the small light

switch. He gave the switch a flick, and the room was bathed in an eerie red light, illuminating walls lined with developing photographs.

He dashed over to a small work bench laden with pans of a special fluid. The viscous liquid was expensive but laden with heavy developmental enchantments, which never came cheap. He pulled off his camera, setting it on an empty space on the bench. With trembling hooves he popped the backing off the camera. He pulled out the film strip and delicately laid the film in the enchanted fluid. He shifted impatiently, watching with awe as the strip of film began to reveal a sequence of pictures.

His breath caught as the squares confirmed what his eyes could not. The images were blurry, but there was no denying what he saw. Not just one, but *both* princesses walking the streets of Canterlot in the middle of the night, but that was not what made these photos unique. What he couldn't tear his eyes from, was the tall bi-pedal beast that accompanied them.

~~~~~

## **Author's Notes:**

It's been over a year.

One whole year since I started this.

I just want to take a brief second to stop and thank everyone that has helped this fic along.

Readers, Pre-readers, editors, threads, everyone.  
You rock.

So I suppose what I'm trying to say, if anything at all;

Is it's good to be back.

NOW

To the story. Most of this was written before I left.  
When I kept on writing well past where this ends. I  
decided to chop it into two so I could get this out  
much sooner.

Hopefully that means 9 will be out relatively soon  
as well.

I'm also working with an almost entirely new team  
of editors. (And am beta-testing a few others) So  
we'll see how they do.

Let's Thank them now.

**KnightShadow**

**Brawny**

Thank you for stepping up to the plate. You guys  
are amazing.

Also, Fun Fact

Apparently I have a TV Tropes thing.

[http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/  
Article2](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/Article2)

# ARTICLE 2 Part IX

## ARTICLE 2

### Part IX

By: Muppetz

~~~~~

“I’m sorry, Princess, but it’s just not possible. *Maybe* if we had more intact parts to study, but were working with melted hunks of plastic. We’re not sure where one part begins and another ends.”

Luna’s visage remained impassive, but her heart was heavy. It was the news she expected, but not what she wanted. “Is there any hope at all?” she asked quietly.

Bolt sighed deeply. “Princess...I could build you a rocket. I could probably even get it into space...but you’re asking me to take twisted scraps and melted goo and reconstruct a device that will not only *tear the fabric of time-space*, but also safely transport a vehicle.” He shook his head and gave a humorless laugh. “Unless your friend is able to explain to me, in detail, exactly how this machine goes back together and how each part works down to the very last nut and screw...” He shrugged, defeated. “As much as I would like to say I could, I can not. The technology simply does not exist.”

“I see,” she said, deflating.

“I’m sorry, Princess. I truly am. If it’s any consolation, we won’t stop working. We still have mountains upon mountains of data to quantify. It’s still possible that we might reach some breakthrough, but barring some massive development, there’s only so much we can do.”

“I understand.” Luna stared at the broken ship, inwardly wishing it would simply surrender its secrets on its own accord.

As if in response, the ship spat out a large green duffle bag, which fell to the ground with a soft thud. The green bag was shortly followed by a tan backpack. Like some game of ‘follow the leader,’ Shane jumped down after his effects, landing quite well on his two feet. Luna was once again surprised by how well balanced he was, considering his bipedal nature. Twilight spilled out next, crashing down on top of Shane’s duffle bag. Luna suppressed a grin. Shane pulled Twilight to her hooves before shouldering the assault pack and looking around the hangar. He turned and said something to Twilight before making his way toward Luna.

The two halted a few yards away, a table laden with scientific equipment separating him and Twilight from Luna and Bolt. There was an awkward silence. Luna knew she should probably break the news to him now, but she hated constantly being the one to deliver all the grim tidings.

Shane slipped the pack off his shoulders, setting it on the ground in front of him. “What are we talking about?” he finally asked.

“...nothing.” Luna breathed.

“Uh huh,” he noted cynically. He began to make his way around the station, inspecting all the alien devices that the scientists were studying. Most of the alien artifacts were protected inside glass cases on top of the tables. Only a few were out on the tables themselves.

Shane stopped at a table laden with small rectangular black tablets. They found several of them in the alien ship but so far had been unable to puzzle out their function. Shane picked one up. He toyed with the device for a few seconds before tossing it over his shoulder and picking up another.

Bolt had to visibly restrain himself from diving to catch the alien device before it clattered to the floor. Shane’s careless disregard for the artifacts was apparent. Luna reminded herself that despite the fact this technology was infinitely more advanced than their own, it was all probably rather commonplace equipment to the human. He fiddled with another device before tossing it like the last, with an unsatisfied grunt. “*Cheap shit,*” he muttered to himself. He grabbed

a third. He depressed a small button on the side, the glossy black front flickered white for a split second before a red lightning bolt flashed on the screen, and the device died back to black, shutting itself off.

The spark of activity seemed to be enough to satisfy the human who walked over to his pack and tucked the device into a side compartment.

“What’s that?” Twilight asked, watching him studiously.

“We call them *Blackboards*. Just a data pad,” he said casually. “It’s a little tablet computer. They break a lot, and they’re cheap, but they make mundane work like inventory or communication a bit easier....*usually*.”

Twilight magically lifted one of the ones he discarded off the floor. “What’s wrong with these?”

“Broken.” He plucked the tablet from Twilight’s magical aura. He hooked a fingernail on the side of the device, and with a bit of effort removed the plastic backing on the device. He took one look at the insides of the device. “Yup, See?” he turned it over to show Twilight. The circuitry was charred, black, and looked like it had been cooked from the inside out. “When the fail safes kicked us out of slip-space, we had some sort of massive electronic failure. Pretty much anything that ran on a circuit got fried. Some random stuff survived. Now I get to sift through all this crap trying to find anything useful that still works.”

“We’ve been working on these devices for the past few days,” Bolt interjected. “Like you said, most of it seems inoperable. We found a few working devices but they’re giving us some trouble. They aren’t particularly...*hoof* friendly. We haven’t had much luck with them.” They grey pegasus stretched his wings and jumped, gliding to a large container on the far end of the station. He motioned for Shane, Luna, and Twilight to join him.

“This is where we’re keeping the functional equipment.” He flipped two latches on the top of the metal container lifting the lid. A sheet of glass protected the artifacts, which rested on a soft cushion.

There were only a dozen or so, a disappointing amount.

“Ha!” Shane burst, upon seeing the collection. “I was wondering where that went.” Shane pulled on the edges of the glass lid, attempting to pry it open. It didn’t budge. The case was locked up tight.

“Hang on,” Bolt turned and started, “I’ll get somepony to come unlock th-”

“SHANE DON’T-!”

**\*SMASH\***

“It’s cool. I got it open.” The human noted nonchalantly, discarding a heavy microscope.

Luna smacked a hoof to her face, shaking her head. “I can’t take you anywhere, can I?”

Shane ignored her, picking up one of the devices. It was a sleek silver pad, very similar to the tablet computer but much smaller. One side was a highly polished black screen; the other was made of some sort of lightweight silver metal. Two black oval buds somehow clipped onto the sides. A strange orange and purple symbol was etched onto the back of the machine alongside a small black lens.

“What is it?” Twilight asked.

Shane didn’t answer. He popped the two black buds off the side of the device, cupping them in the palm of his hand. With his free hand he beckoned Twilight closer with a finger.

Confused, Twilight looked back at Luna for advice. The Princess merely shrugged her wings. She had no idea what he could be playing at.

Twilight edged closer, Shane grinning at her hesitation. He took a black bud into each hand, setting the small silver pad aside. He reached for Twilight’s head and she recoiled.



“Aw, now you’re starting to hurt my feelings,” he teased at her reaction. “All this quality time together and you still don’t trust me?”

“Not really,” Twilight admitted with a small grin.

“Hmm. I guess I should be proud of you. Now come here, you wanna see what it does or not?”

Twilight reached her head back toward him, comforted with the knowledge that Luna was watching the human like a hawk. He pinched the black buds in between his fingers. He held Twilight’s head in place with the heels of his palm, and as gently as he could, plugged a bud into each of Twilight’s ears.

It certainly wasn’t what she was expecting, but she was willing to play along for the time being. He released Twilight’s head and picked up the silver pad. He swiped and prodded at the mirrored screen which Twilight saw was now glowing with activity.

Twilight watched him curiously. With the buds in her ears, the world had become strangely muted. Her own breathing seemed much louder than usual. Limited hearing aside, she was still able to understand him when he began to speak.

“Probably ought to start you off with something a bit tamer. Wouldn’t wanna culture shock the shit out of you....yet. Here, see how this strikes you.”

He poked the screen one final time before lowering it and watching Twilight, apparently waiting for her reaction.

She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do. She didn’t feel any different. She was just about to say something when the soft line of a violin echoed through her head. The note faded away, only to come back. The uplifting notes were slowly joined by an entire symphony of instruments. Twilight felt like there was an entire orchestra in her head. “Its music!” she announced, infinitely excited. It was so delightfully unexpected. She never even stopped to wonder about humans having an artistic side. She couldn’t help but laugh.

Shane genuinely smiled. Bolt and Luna moved forward, both instantly fascinated. Shane set the silver pad down in front of Twilight, allowing her to see the glowing screen. There was a small black and white picture on the display. It was a clearly aged human male. Bold white words floated across the screen under the picture.

### *‘Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky-1812 Overture’*

There was also a running timer informing her how long she had been listening. A small lightning bolt in the top corner of the screen glowed dull yellow. Inside the little bolt were numbers. ‘**23%**’ She watched it for a moment, and noticed the number was dropping it now read ‘**22%**’. She realized it must signify the charge of some internal power source.

Luna seated herself next to Twilight, ready to explore the mysteries of the alien music box. Twilight touched the screen with the tip of her purple hoof. A small display of symbols superimposed themselves upon the screen. Twilight selected one, a small circle with two parallel lines. She touched it, and it flashed in response and the symphony immediately ceased, leaving only silence. A tiny word appeared at the bottom; “*Paused*”.

Twilight’s brow furrowed. She went to press the button again, but another symbol had replaced it; a circle with a sideways triangle. For lack of a better option she tapped it. It flashed, and once again the music flowed. Twilight smiled. She magically pulled the buds from her ears and offered them to Luna enthusiastically.

Luna eyed them curiously. She could hear the faint melody drifting from them, but the device was clearly meant to be enjoyed by one individual at a time. She delicately lifted the buds with a spell and secured them inside her own ears. Orchestral music reverberated through her head, as if she were surrounded by an invisible symphony. It was certainly a delightful invention. Much more convenient than the hoof cranked phonographs that most ponies in Equestria used. Few enough owned electronic stereos, and even those tended to be bulky and expensive. How the humans had managed to compress such a device into something as small as the black ear buds was simply beyond her.

With Luna and Twilight successfully enthralled with the media player, the human took to continuing his examination of the rest of the working devices. He selected a few, stuffing them into various pockets of the assault pack. Bolt watched him studiously. His heart aching slightly as he watch this creature steal away some of the biggest scientific breakthroughs Bolt was likely to ever encounter in his life, even if they weren't *technically* his.

Twilight and Luna had made several great strides in puzzling out the mysteries of the alien music pad. They discovered the double triangle symbols would change the song. They were now busy cycling through a seemingly endless list of song titles. Luna was fascinated by the enormous variety of human music. It was almost eerie in a way. She, despite the similarities in language, knew the words that echoed through the buds were of humans, not ponies. It almost served as a reminder that Shane was not a lone oddity. There were indeed other humans out there, somewhere, recording the songs of their people and stuffing them into little music pads.

Luna tapped the 'next' symbol. It flashed and two voices began to sound a haunting melody.

*-Oooooooooohhhh. Oooooooooooooooooohhhh.*

*-I'm a dead man walking here. That's the least of all my fears.*

*-Oooh, underneath the water.*

*-It's not Alabama clay, keeps my tremblin' hands away.*

*-Please forgive me father*

Luna tapped the icon again.

*-Whoaaa*

*-The hot summer night, fell like a net. I've gotta fiiiind my baby yet.*

*-I need you, to soothe my head. Turn my bluuue heart to red.*

*-Doctor, Doctor, gimme the news, I gotta bad case of lovin' you.*

Luna chuckled at the lyrics. The variety alone was staggering. The little pad seemed capable of producing everything from the pulsing synthetic beats of the nightclubs, to the rolling twang of the country guitar. She wished she could explore it longer, but she was acutely aware of her more pressing duties. Still, a few more moments couldn't hurt.

She returned her attention to the silver pad at her hooves. The screen was no longer providing her with the control symbols. The glowing screen had returned to a lifeless, glossy black. Luna tapped on it, confused. The buds were still playing their song. She could still hear the lyrics describing the story of the stallion that had inadvertently fallen in love with his physician.

She turned toward Shane who was still busy fiddling with random electronics. **"HUMAN, THIS DEVICE SEEMS TO BE EXPERIENCING SOME TYPE OF MALFUNCTION. WE REQUEST YOUR ASSISTANCE REPARING IT!"**

Shane ducked and clasped his hands over his rounded ears to shield them from the force of the princess' royal Canterlot voice, teeth firmly gritted in pain. He worked his jaw in circles as he walked back over to the Lunar Princess. He reached by her head and snatched one of the black buds from her ear. "You don't have to scream," he began annoyed, "**WE** can hear just fine." Shane picked up the device, "It just went to sleep. The battery is almost dead. It shuts off the display to save power."

"Clever little thing," she commented, fascinated.

"...yeah. If it does it again just push this button on the side." He returned the device to Luna's care and went back to his scavenging, this time Twilight accompanying him. Luna looked at the pad, display now fully revived. Luna noticed the little yellow lightning bolt in the corner had changed from yellow to a bright red. "19%" was now flashing directly beneath it.

She didn't have much time before the device ran out of power. Luna turned, quickly spotting her sister standing with Applejack near a large pyramid of boxes. "Celestia! Come and see this!"

Princess Celestia exchanged a few words with the farm pony, who nodded enthusiastically. Celestia tucked one of the brown plastic packages under a wing and began to trot briskly over to her younger sister.

Celestia came up to her younger sister and excitedly produced one of the brown plastic packages. “Look Luna, Human food!” She floated the package to her sister.

The brown plastic packaging was sealed up tight, most likely to ensure a long shelf life during travel. ‘**MRE**’ was stamped across the front in big black letters. Underneath were a few smaller words. ‘

Meal, Ready-To-Eat, Individual

Menu No. 23 – Chicken Pesto Pasta’

Warfighter Recommended

Warfighter Tested

Warfighter Approved

THE WORNICK COMPANY

CINCINATTI, OH 45242

U.S GOVERNMENT PROPERTY

COMMERCIAL RESALE IS UNLAWFUL

FLAMELESS RATION HEATERS ARE PROHIBITED ON  
COMMERCIAL AIRLINES UNLESS SEALED IN ORIGINAL MRE  
MENU BAG

“Which one did you get?” Shane asked, wandering over. Celestia levitated the bag over to him. He snagged it out of the air, turning it over in his hands. “Pesto,” he shrugged, “eh... that one’s actually not bad.” He pulled apart the end of the bag, he dug around inside, selecting out yet another vacuum sealed brown bag. “These are pretty good though,” he announced, ripping open the package. He pulled out some sort of bread square, breaking off a stick and biting

a chunk, chewing happily. He held the package out, offering it to the princess. Celestia cast a questioning glance at Bolt.

“We tested all of them,” he announced. “They’re safe to eat... *technically*. They pack enough preservatives to mummify a small cat...but...you know...your call, Highness,” he shrugged.

“Celestia’s horn glowed as she levitated one of the bread sticks from the package. She sniffed it cautiously. The breadstick smelled of garlic and plastic. She took a tentative nibble, everypony awaiting her verdict. She chewed for a few second before shrugging herself. “It’s actually quite good,” she agreed, and popped the rest of the bread snack into her mouth, munching thoughtfully.

Shane stuffed the empty wrapper back in the larger MRE package and set it on a nearby table. He went back over to his table with Twilight, who was watching him work on yet another strange device.

Luna began to eagerly explain to her elder sister the wonders of the music pad.

~~~~~

“What’s this one?” Twilight asked nudging one of the machines Shane was toying with.

“A corpsman’s best friend,” he elaborated subversively.

“What does it do?” She poked it with a hoof.

He pulled it out of her reach. “If I can fix it I’ll show you.”

“What wrong with it?” She questioned immediately.

He sighed, “I don’t know.”

It was a thin plastic band, maybe three or four inches wide. It was hinged, so that the device would open into two half circles, like a large electronic vambrace. One half housed a display screen similar to the music pad, about the size of a playing card. The inside of the plastic band was lined with several metal sensor plates.

“What do you need it for?” She continued.

“I don’t really,” he admitted. “But I’d still like to get it working. I probably won’t even use it, but I’d rather have it and not need it, than need it and not have it.”

“Luck favors the prepared,” she added.

“So I’ve heard. Here, make yourself useful.” He tossed the device toward her and she fumbled attempting to catch the alien hardware in her hooves. “Take out those screws and try to get the backing off.”

Twilight examined the inside of the band behind the screen. Four tiny silver screws held a small plastic plate in place. Shane stepped past Twilight and began digging through a bin filled with what looked like scraps.

Twilight’s horn began to glow softly, as she began to magically manipulate one of the silver screws. It seemed stuck at first, but eventually the tiny metal screw began to twist out of place. Once it was out, she set the miniscule rivet on the table. It took her less than a minute to repeat the gesture for the last three.

Shane finished digging. He returned with a silver cylinder, which looked much like an ordinary coffee thermos. He also managed to find a second device, identical to the white band he was working on.

Shane presented Twilight with the second device. “If you would be so kind,” he encouraged.

“With pleasure,” she replied happily. She set about removing the backing of the new device. Once done she handed it back to him.

Shane examined the innards of the new band carefully. His fingers would be too big to do any fine work on the inside of the tiny machine. He knelt down to give Twilight a look. “See that small blue square piece?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied somewhat confused.

“Yank the little fucker out.”

Twilight complied curiously and passed it to the human who set it on the table. Shane tossed the now gutted device back toward the bin, missing but apparently not caring enough to go pick it up.

He had Twilight repeat the same spell on the old device, removing the blue square, which he discarded as well. Shane carefully fitted the new square into the old device. The screen flickered a bit but died back to black. Shane excitedly reached for the silver cylinder. He unscrewed the lid, and pulled out a large rubber mat. The mat was rolled up like a carpet, a long black wire wrapped around it keeping its shape.

Shane unwound the wire from the mat and set it on the table giving it a tiny push and rolling it out flat. The inside was covered in hundreds of tiny black mirrors. The black wire was connected to the corner of the mat, ending with a small golden jack.

Shane plugged the wire into a port on the side of the white device. The screen lit up.

Twilight smiled, “Solar panels?”

“Mmm hmm,” he confirmed absentmindedly.

“Clever,” Twilight noted.

A bright red cross flashed happily on the display. “*CLS-Support Systems*” scrolled across the bottom, followed by “*Awaiting Host*”. Shane seemed satisfied enough with the device. He unplugged it, rolling the mat back up and placed it back inside its protective cylinder. Shane grabbed up his now functional toy and the metal cylinder, walked back to his pack, and stuffed them inside.

~~~~~

“Luna, I don’t think it did it on purpose.” Celestia attempted to reason.

“I do not care what its intentions were,” Luna replied, still blushing. “I will not sit here and allow this *thing* to speak to me in such a vile



fashion. I will not be shaking my...'*money maker*' for anypony. Regardless of how enjoyable he seems to think it may be."

Luna had the device laying face down on the floor, so that it would know what it had done. Celestia suppressed a grin. Shane stepped past the two, reaching down and plucking the device off the ground. He looked at the title on the screen, then back at Luna before chuckling and stuffing it into his cargo pocket as he walked away.

"Where are you going?" Celestia asked.

He didn't answer. He merely snagged the strap on the green sea bag and slung it over a shoulder, walking off toward where Applejack was still sorting through the piles of alien food rations.

~~~~~

AJ rummaged through the cardboard box. She eventually realized that the same twenty five or so varieties just repeated themselves. She did not envy whoever had to survive of these things for any period of time. She also noted that an overly large number of the meals featured some form of meat. So far she hadn't seen any pony flesh on the entrees, but there were still ones like 'pork rib' or even worse 'beef stew' and she couldn't help but think of Daisy Jo. She decided that she probably shouldn't introduce Shane to any of her bovine friends.

"Whatcha' doing?" came a deep voice from directly behind her, making her nearly jump out of her skin. She spun around to see Shane watching diligently.

"Gracious, sugarcube. Ya'll nearly scared me half ta death. Aint'cha ever been taught not ta sneak up on ponies?"

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "I *casually* walked over here. There was no sneaking involved. Maybe you just need to work on your situational awareness," he retorted with a smug smile. He shrugged off his bags and stepped past the young farm pony.

He climbed up to the pyramid of boxes. He grabbed two cases from

near the top tossed them down toward his duffle bag. He snapped the white plastic straps that held the lids on the cases closed.

He opened his sea bag. It looked as though it was stuffed with clothes; he fished around in the bag for a moment, producing a strange eight pointed hat, made of the same material as his utilities. He stuffed the cover in a cargo pocket before diving right back into the bag. He began to remove and discard several random sets of clothing. Most were identical to the ones he was wearing. She also saw him remove a few olive drab skivvy shirts and pairs of extra-short shorty short shorts, which she suppressed the urge to comment on.

When he was satisfied with his abridged wardrobe, he started stuffing the bag with MRE packages. Applejack wandered closer.

Shane stopped after looking at a particular package, grimacing. “Veggie Burger,” he groused. “Why do you even exist?!” he demanded of the plastic package. It gave no response, and Shane threw it over his shoulder with apparent repulsion.

“I’m pretty sure the Princess will keep ya fed, sugarcube.”

“I don’t doubt it,” he answered. “However, I’ve never found it a good idea to get dependant on someone for something. Generous as you all *seem*, I’d like to maintain some level of self sufficiency. Besides, your diet tends to be a bit ...conservative for my taste.”

“Ah guess that makes sense,” she admitted reluctantly, as Shane resumed packing MREs into the sea bag. “So ya’ll *really do* eat meat, huh?” she examined one labeled “*Beef Brisket*”.

“You guys seem kinda fixated on this, huh?” he noted.

“Sorry, sugarcube, it’s just kinda...*strange*. I don’t reckon I come across many carnivores that ain’t trying ta eat me.”

“Would it make you feel better if I killed and ate someone?” he laughed.

“That ain’t exactly what ah meant.”

“Then try saying what you mean,” he suggested.

Applejack thought for a second, trying to rephrase the question. “How do you do it? I mean don’t it make ya feel bad?”

“Nope,” he answered plainly. “I refuse to apologize for my nature. But if it helps try to look at it like this,” he started. “Do you feel bad for eating a carrot?”

“No, but a carrot’s just a plant.”

“So, if I were to magically drop you in a world of sentient carrot people, how would you justify all those innocent carrots you ate in your life?”

“Ah guess ah see yer point,” she admitted.

“I promise it’s nothing personal. I wasn’t the one who decided to make animals delicious.”

“I suppose it ain’t really mah place ta question nature. It’s just mighty strange ta know this here used to be some poor critter.” She nudged a package with a hoof.

He laughed bitingly at that. When AJ asked him why, he answered; “The legitimacy of MRE meat products is somewhat of an object for debate. I’d *like* to believe that was at one point a living animal. But that shit has been processed so many times; to call it ‘beef’ is really more of an insult to cows.”

Applejack couldn’t tell if he was joking or not. So she gave him one of those half- hearted, uncertain chuckles and a wavering grin. She wasn’t sure if he’d actually bought it, but it seemed to satisfy him because he returned the grin and went back to work packing his food.

Soon the point came where he could no longer force any packages into the green sea bag. He closed up the opening on the top of the sea bag, barely getting the clasps to clip together. He snaked an arm through one of the shoulder straps and grabbed his backpack by a handle.

“Will that be enough?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It’ll last awhile. If I’m smart it can last two weeks. If I really stretch it, maybe three.”

“What now?” Applejack asked.

Shane looked back at Celestia and Luna who were busy talking to Bolt about something. Twilight had wandered over to where Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy were observing the lab technicians running various chemical tests inside a plastic bubble.

His eyes wandered over to Rarity who was off by herself examining the contents of yet another station littered with olive drab pelican cases.

“Let’s go see what Curly-Cue is up to,” he suggested, clearly already having made up his mind.

“That’s Rarity, sugarcube,” Applejack corrected, knowing the fashionista probably wouldn’t have appreciated the nickname.

“Rarity,” he repeated.

The walk was brief, but Shane surprised Applejack when he made a strange attempt at small talk. “So what’s your story?”

Applejack thought for a minute, wondering at this newfound curiosity of his. Until now he seemed relatively disinterested in everypony. “Ain’t much ta tell I suppose. Grew up on mah family’s apple orchard with Granny and mah brother and sister. Been runnin’ the family business ever since ah was old ‘nuff.”

“Hmm,” He scratched his chin with both hands, irritated with the stubble that was growing on his cheeks.

“What about you?” Applejack asked. “You ain’t said much about yourself since ya got here.”

“That’s true,” he nodded, saying nothing more.

Applejack cleared her throat, “*Hint hint*,” she prodded.

He grinned, “Maybe someday,” he relented, “But not today.”

AJ rolled her eyes, fairly unsurprised. They came upon Rarity who was inspecting a large alien crate, lined with black padding. The dark green box was filled to the brim with a strange assortment of gear. What seemed like hundreds of random straps and buckles were in a tangled mess in the box.

“Heya, Rare. Whatcha got there?” Applejack greeted warmly.

Rarity turned and beheld the two.

“Hello, darlings. I’m not entirely sure to be perfectly honest with you.”

Shane peeked into the pelican crate. He let out an exited “Ooh,” and snatched a tan buckle pulling it out and shaking it free of all the tangled straps that attempted to accompany it. Once free, he pulled it back. The buckle was attached to a tan thigh holster, identical to the one the Princesses had taken away from him back in the hospital. He happily strapped the empty holster to his right thigh. “I’m feelin’ better already,” he announced excitedly, flexing his leg. “What else is in here?” He continued digging. He pulled out several straps and pouches that looked like they would attach perfectly to the pals webbing that covered his pack.

Once he picked the crate of prizes, he moved to another. He unhooked the latches and popped it open. This one was full of thick-looking vests, unsurprisingly also covered in the same pals webbing.

“*If nothing else,*” Rarity decided, “*It’s certainly exceedingly customizable.*” Rarity levitated one closer. It was heavy. The inside of the vest was lined with thick, semi-flexible plates. She opened a velcro flap, and removed one of the armor plates. The plate was made of several hundred overlapping discs, each a little more than half an inch thick. The discs were arranged in a pattern greatly resembling scales. Each individual disc was woven out of heavy, tight-knit fibers.

Shane dug a larger vest out for himself. He also selected several

attachment plates from a bin on the side.

He slipped the vest over his shoulders, wincing slightly, as he poked his arms through the holes. He began attaching the extra plates. One was a high back yoke made of the same thick material as the vest. Another two wrapped around his shoulders, covering a good portion of his biceps. There were extra plates that looked like they attached to the bottom to cover his hips, but he didn't bother with them.

His upper torso was now almost entirely encased in armor plating. He rapped his knuckles on the front of his chest a few times, and smiled. "Now we're getting somewhere." He said happily.

"It's hardly a fashion statement," Rarity noted, "but I doubt that was its intended purpose."

"Functionality, *Darling*." He retorted, doing his best to mimic the unicorn's accent. Rarity shot him an unamused glare. Applejack could only chuckle, deeply amused by the little gibe.

Shane just grinned wolfishly, drumming his fingers on his empty holster.

~~~~~

"Bolt," Celestia began carefully, "...are these what I think they are?"

The ashen engineer's smile was almost wide enough to split his face in two. He was clearly saving his favorite revelation for last. "Weapons, your highness." He said with nothing but prideful excitement in his voice.

The inside of the tent was lined with steel plates and sandbags. Two long racks flanked either side, all lined up with an arsenal of human assault weapons. Several black pelican cases lay open to reveal thousands upon thousands of shining brass rounds. It was an impressive display, to say the least.

Bolt began to eagerly dash around the armor plated tent, like a foal in a candy store. "It's amazing, Princess. It really is. It's some of the

most advanced pieces of simple machinery I have ever encountered.” He hefted one of the larger heavy-looking machines off the rack, using a wing to steady the machine gun, and rested it on the steel table in the center of the tent. This weapon was much thicker than the other, more sleek, rifles, but it still radiated a deadly purpose. “The concept is simple enough,” he began to elaborate. “In all honesty this is nothing more than a fancy miniature cannon. It’s designed to send little copper slugs out this barrel at supersonic speeds.” Celestia already had a basic idea of how the weapons functioned from her brief study of their smaller cousin she had confiscated from the Major. “It’s designed to fire these,” he scooped a few brass rounds from one of the containers and let them fall onto the metal table with an annoying clatter. “The calibers vary slightly but they all function under the same basic principle. Either an electric pulse or the strike of a small pin sets off this tiny primary ignition charge on the back. That ignites a secondary charge inside the cartridge. The round is pushed out of the casing by the expanding gas, which propels it down and out the barrel. Most of the projectiles are little copper-jacketed lead slugs. But there are a few cases of specialty rounds, some packed with a burning incendiary phosphorous. Then there’s my favorite,” He pulled long shining belt of rounds from a case off to the side, and clicked the first round into the feed tray of the weapon. “These babies have the same phosphorous packing, with a secondary tungsten carbide core. This sucker could punch through an inch of tempered steel like butter...” Bolt was a little too excited about the arsenal of human weapons.

Luna stalked carefully around the room, examining the human weapons with a poorly concealed look of awe. They were beautiful in the most terrifying way. They were sleek, elegant, and powerful. They made the few cannons in the castle armory seem like ancient relics.

Celestia didn’t know what exactly the humans expected to encounter to warrant such a store. She felt a very unnerving chill run down her spine. She recalled the deadly potential of just Shane with his small handgun. Just one human. What chance would Equestria possibly stand against entire armies of assault rifle toting Shane Dorans?

They were, to put it bluntly, *hilariously* outgunned.

Celestia, however, did not find herself envying the humans weapons. She reflected on the emotion running through her, somewhat surprising herself when she settled upon *pity*. What manner of existence must they have suffered through to warrant the need for such measures?

Luna surprised the young stallion when she spoke. “Director, would you mind stepping out for a moment. I would like to have a word with my sister in private.” She was not unkind with her words, but she was clearly not making a request.

“Oh...um, of course, your highness. Please take your time,” Bolt replied with a small bow, somewhat caught of guard. He exited the tent through the steel-plated plastic door, leaving them alone amongst the machines of war.



# ARTICLE 2 Part X

## ARTICLE 2

### Part X

By: Muppetz

~~~~~

Shane took a knee so that the young mares could have a better view. The girls all nudged closer, careful to make sure they didn't crowd the human. Shane pulled out the device Twilight helped him fix earlier. He adjusted the shoulder plate on his body armor. The curved ballistic plate reached over his shoulder; connecting to the long high-ballistic yoke that protected his neck. He hooked a finger under the Kevlar shoulder plate, snagging the end of a small braided wire ending with a small golden tip. He pulled the slack of the cord from under the shoulder plate, plugging the golden tip into a small port on the back side of the yoke. Twilight watching fascinated as the human worked together the internal wiring of the armor.

He grabbed the circular plastic device popping a small latch on the side, causing the device to open like a pair of handcuffs. The Kevlar shoulder plate had a small groove that allowed the device to clamp around the curved plate. Shane clipped it into place, fitting it securely around his upper arm.

He shifted, giving the girls a better look at the device's small display screen. He flicked a tiny switch on the side, and the screen flickered to life, eliciting a soft 'ooooh' from Pinkie Pie, who leaned in closer.

*Please Wait...* flashed in small white letters across the display. Soon the screen changed, the backlight shifted to a soft green. A black readout was displayed across the screen in three rows.

95 mm/Hg

85 - bpm. ---^---^----^--

97.6 f

“Is that you?” Twilight asked.

“Yep,” he smiled, interestingly enough. He usually didn’t make such a gesture flippantly. Maybe his mood was improving. “Sensor pads on the inside of these plates take readings of my vital signs.”

“Why?” Dash asked.

“If I get hit a corpsman won’t waste time having to manually check vitals; makes it a bit easier for them to figure out if I’m even salvageable or if I’m already dead. Plus, it eliminates the need to remove the casualty’s armor in the middle of a killzone. That’s all less time they have to spend in danger areas. The less time you spend in a firefight, the less shot you will get. Even after he’s stable you can use it to monitor the victim for shock or whatever. It’s actually pretty handy.”

“Are you expecting somepony to shoot you?” Twilight asked with a slight tease in her voice, as she poked the flak experimentally with a hoof.

“At the very least, I am concerned about the possibility,” he retorted, brushing away her hoof.

“I don’t think you need to worry,” she started with a laugh. “Equestria is a pretty safe place.”

The room suddenly exploded with the sound of firecrackers, as one of the white tents lit up with rattle of automatic gunfire. The air shattered with a sonic crack as a bullet tore through the space just above their heads. “GE'DOWN!” Shane screamed above the noise.

Before Twilight could even wonder what was happening, Shane shoved her to the ground before grabbing Rainbow Dash by the tail, yanking her out of the air and dragging her down to the deck as he dove for it himself.

Applejack Fluttershy and Rarity had the common sense to duck

behind a few shipping containers, Pinkie Pie continued to stand there like a blissfully confused owl as rounds continued to rip randomly through the air. Swearing loudly, Shane reached over and snagged a fistful of fluffy, pink mane and yanked the bubblegum mare off her hooves and down into a protective embrace, the object of which Pinkie soundly missed, returning the “hug” with unbridled enthusiasm.

As suddenly as the uproar started, it ended. There was nothing but silence for several painstaking seconds. Shane popped his head up, with a look of absolute fury. He struggled for a moment to pry Pinkie off and jumped to his feet. Sprinting to the tent from which the spray of gunfire had erupted, shouting some of the most creatively vulgar strings of swear words Twilight had ever heard.

“That was just bad timing. Equestria is usually very safe!” Twilight shouted after him.

~~~~~

Once Bolt was through, Luna closed the plated door, sliding a thin metal latch into place to keep it shut. She turned back to her elder sister, who was staring off at nothing in particular.

Luna sighed tiredly. “It seems we have yet another bushel of thorns to untangle.”

“Indeed,” Celestia remarked, distractedly brushing a wing over one of the pitch black rifles.

“How are we going to handle this?” Luna prodded, hoping for something a bit more contributive from her sister. “We can’t ignore something like this.”

“No,” Celestia replied quietly, “but I shudder to think of what it could mean for Equestria.”

“You mean suddenly being thrust hundreds of years forward in military technologies? Yes, I imagine it would come as quite the shock, but can we afford to let an opportunity like this slip by?”

“I am more concerned by the implications of exploiting it. The *safe*

thing to do would be to bury all of this.”

“*Bury* an opportunity to ensure Equestria’s protection? Celestia how can you be so irresponsible? This could *guarantee* peace for Equestria. Even just a small arsenal of these and no government or army would *dare* threaten our borders!”

“Peace is not as difficult to achieve as it once was, sister. The world has changed. One thousand years our subjects have not had to endure the terrors of war. We are at peace *now*. The last thing we need to be doing is starting an arms race!”

“And what will happen when history repeats itself? You and I have lived too long to pretend that it won’t. How many ponies are you willing to let die because you let rosy idealism cloud your judgment? When war finally does come, *and it will*, how will you justify spilling the blood of our subjects, knowing you had the opportunity to prevent it?!”

“Preparing for war on such a massive scale serves only to invite it to our doorstep! You speak of our defense, but no sword will ever act as a shield! I refuse to sacrifice our souls in the name of safety. That leads only to an ever increasingly slippery slope. You want to turn Equestria into some sole military superpower? I admit, you would secure peace, but only for a time, but deterrence is *not* the same as peace, Luna. What may seem like our salvation now, will be our downfall later.”

Luna sighed, annoyed. “I understand the danger, sister, but if we shut our eyes and bury our heads in the sand every time some frightening new development was achieved, there would be no progress. These weapons could protect us, Celestia. And *no*, I do not wish to see Equestria transformed into some military industrialist. It would break my heart to see our peaceful nation corrupted by violence, and if that is what it takes to keep them safe; is it not worth it? It is better to be prepared for war than to sit praying it never comes.”

Celestia sat on her haunches and massaged her temple with a golden shod hoof. “Neither option appeals to me. I do not wish to leave us defenseless, nor do I want to see Equestria arming itself

after so many years of advocating peace. It would be seen as a threat and make us a target.”

Luna sighed deeply, approaching the belt fed weapon Bolt had left on the table. She scrutinized it; an unreadable expression in her face. “Whatever we choose, we need to act soon. This is not something that is best left idle. Too many ponies have seen these weapons as it is. If we wait too much longer, covering this up won’t be an option. It may already be too late.” Her horn began to glow as she lifted the steel black machine off the table, the belt of ammunition trailing out like a brass waterfall.

“Be careful with that, Luna. You don’t know what you’re doing,” Celestia warned.

“Relax. I’m just looking, it’s not-”

The weapon fired with ear shattering report. Luna immediately severed the magic, allowing the machine gun to fall to the table as it continued to bounce around wildly, spraying bullets in every direction, the armor piercing rounds shredding through the tent’s protective plates with ease.

The two princesses immediately dove under the table, seeking the slight protection it offered. Celestia quickly severed the belt of ammunition with a spell, and a few painful seconds later, the machine clattered back to the table.

Luna cautiously poked her head over the table. She peered at the smoking machine gun lying motionless on the steel table. “... Interesting.”

The thin metal latch on the door cracked off with a sharp ping as the plated door slammed open. An enraged-looking Shane stepped through the portal, now wearing some sort of strange looking armored vest. He strode right past Luna and Celestia and snatched the machine gun off the table and racked the charging handle. He popped open the feed cover before slamming it shut. Weapon still in hand he turned his attention to the princesses. He didn’t look happy.

“Have you lost YOUR FUCKING MINDS?!?! Do you even have any FUCKING idea what you’re doing?!” He demanded furiously. “JESUS, I thought you people were capable of displaying a *shred* of rational thought! Do I *REALLY* have to fucking babysit you two?!”

Celestia had to admit she was still a bit shaken from the rogue killing machine that had nearly turned them all into swiss cheese, but part of her could only be amused by the human’s tirade. Being an immensely powerful alicorn princess, she didn’t exactly get chewed out very often. It was a somewhat novel experience.

“I mean... *Christ!* You could’ve killed somebody! OR WORSE!” he added in a terrible voice, “...*you could have fucked up one of my guns.*”

“PRINCESS!?” Bolt slammed to the ground outside the door, “Is everypony alright?!?!?”

“Fine Director, thank you. Was anypony hurt?”

“No, thankfully. What happened?”

“Luna.” Celestia said plainly, as if that summed it up, earning an irritated glare from the younger alicorn.

Shane turned back to the two alicorns. “We’ll finish this conversation later,” he menaced through gritted teeth. He stepped passed the princesses, practically throwing the large machine gun back down onto the steel table, and approaching one of the long racks of assault rifles.

Celestia trotted up next to him. She knew he probably wouldn’t care for her proximity, but she wished to speak in some relative privacy.

He reached below the racks of assault rifles, pulling open a wide drawer in the steel rack. On which lay several replicas of his handgun which was still safely resting in the vault in Celestia’s office.

He reached for one, and Celestia pinned his hand down with a golden shod hoof. He shot her one of the most poisonous looks she had ever seen from another living creature.

She returned his look, pouring all her uneasiness with the situation into the stare, saying more with her eyes than she ever could with her words.

He rolled his eyes, but must have gotten the message because his expression softened considerably. He inhaled, "Princess," he started very quietly, "I know you're afraid, and I understand that all this is probably very unnerving for you. We haven't exactly built a stellar track record thus far and I'm willing to take a very small portion of the blame for that." Celestia resisted the urge to smirk, "But this is something I take very, *very* seriously. Up until now, I've been relatively content to let you handle this cluster-fuck as you saw fit, but not this. This is one thing that we are handling my way and my way *only*." Celestia barely began to open her mouth when he cut her off. "This is not a negotiation. This is not a request. This is not a threat. This is me simply stating the facts of the situation. I am aware you are unfamiliar with our SOPs. So I'll just say that *ordinarily* the seizure of another government's munitions is seen by my kind as an exceedingly hostile gesture. I would be well within my rights to use whatever means necessary to make sure these weapons do not fall into the hands of ...let's face it, a potential enemy."

"I assure you, we had no intention of inciting aggression," Celestia quickly renounced, "We were merely trying to--"

"Calm down," Shane cut her off, "I'm not accusing you of anything. I *know* you didn't know any better. But regardless, as of *right now* I am re-appropriating these weapons, and any and all materials I think might prove dangerous to you, myself, or others. I don't care how shiny and advanced they seem to you. I don't care what you think you'll benefit by studying them. If I flag it, *it goes*. No questions, no 'buts.' I'm doing this to protect you. This is not something you as a species are ready for yet, so I am removing the temptation."

Celestia stared into his hard blue eyes. He was being deathly serious.

"I need you to be on board with me here, Celestia, because one way or another, I'm confiscating these weapons from you. We can work

together and do this the easy way, *OR*...you can be difficult about it, and we'll do this the *really* easy way."

His warning made Celestia's spine tingle. He left zero room to maneuver, and she preferred not to think of what '*the really easy way*' entailed. She wasn't thrilled with the circumstances but she found herself oddly relieved. Celestia wasn't sure if he was doing it on purpose or not but he had, in effect, given her a way out. He made the decision that she and Luna seemed unable to, and while she was never one to shy away from responsibilities, it was strangely liberating to have someone else be at the proverbial reins. "Very well, Major. You will have my support. I feel no shame in admitting that this is hardly my field of expertise. Handle this as you will, and you shall suffer no interference from me."

Shane gave her a satisfied grin, and tried to pull his hand out from under her golden hoof, but she kept it pinned firmly in place.

"But be warned, Major. I am putting an enormous amount of trust in you. Betray that trust, and the consequences will be...*unpleasant*." She tried her best to sound intimidating, but the amused smile that spread across the human's lips somehow gave her the impression that the remark may not have had the desired effect.

He chuckled softly, "I'd be disappointed if they weren't." And in a deceptively cheerful tone he added, "Now please remove your hoof or I will remove it for you." He smiled happily.

Celestia released his hand, giving him an unamused glare.

"See? We *can* work together." He wrapped his fingers around the grip of one of the pistols. "And *relax*," he soothed, still smiling, "I do this for a living." He slammed a magazine into the handle, racking the slide with a satisfying ring.

Celestia watched, still not entirely convinced, as he slipped the pistol into the molded holster on his thigh.

Bolt's voice caught their attention as he let out an exasperated groan when he nudged one of the spent brass shells on the floor. "Were those the tungsten rounds?" His head drooped a bit. "I



wanted to shoot those.” He murmured, depressed.

Celestia and Luna, both gave him a curious glance.

“What? It’s fun,” he defended.

“I hate to burst your bubble, brother, but no one’s shooting anything anymore....Except maybe me, should the occasion call for it.”

“*Which it won’t.*” Celestia reminded warningly.

“What do you mean?” Bolt asked, confused.

“Standard operating procedure dictates that it is my *joyous* duty to relieve you of all arms and ammunition illegally acquired from the site of a downed Naval vessel,” he recited in a bored monotone. “Seeing as I still find myself unable to provide sufficient security for remanded materials, all unexploded ordinance is to be destroyed under my supervision, along with any and all weapons platforms I deem necessary. *Please* be advised, non-compliance will be met with the use of deadly force. Thank you for your cooperation.” Celestia got the feeling this wasn’t the first time he had recited the speech.

“Waitwaitwaitwait...You’re going to destroy all of this?!” Bolt sounded horrified.

“Yuuup.” He selected an assault rifle off the rack, slipping his head and left arm through the loop in a complicated looking sling, before sliding it so the rifle was slung across his back.

“Y-You...but...you can’t just...I mean think of everything we could...you can’t be serious!” He stammered.

“*OH but I can.*” Shane deadpanned.

“No no no no,” Bolt sprinted over to a rack of rifles, grabbing an armful of assorted weapons, shielding them as a father would his foals. “This research...it’s too important! I can’t let that happen.”

Shane stuck the stallion with a shadowy gaze. “Put em’ down.”

“No!”

Shane pulled the pistol from its holster, letting it hang menacingly at his side.

Celestia immediately stepped in between the two, heart racing at the sudden escalation. “Both of you stop it *right now!*” She commanded. “Shane, let me handle this.”

“*Then handle it. Or I will,*” he replied coldly. Bolt merely hugged the rifles tighter, a look of righteous defiance across his muzzle.

Celestia turned to the ash grey stallion. “Director, listen to me. Give the human back his weapons.”

“Princess, please, you can’t do this. Think about what we could do with these. We could-”

“I *have* thought about it, Director,” Celestia interrupted sternly. “We’re toying with something we can not hope to control, nor do I wish to. I understand your intentions are well placed. However, this path will only end in violence, and I will not allow it. No peace achieved through force can last. Besides, these do not belong to us. They belong to the human, and I have chosen to heed his council on the matter.” Bolt just looked back at her, heartbroken. “Please, do as he says, Bolt. If not for him, then for me.” Bolt was clearly fighting some invisible moral battle.

With a final grunt and a muttered swear word, he released the weapons, allowing them to fall to the deck with a clatter. He crossed his arms and studiously avoided eye contact.

Celestia turned back to Shane. He returned the sidearm to its proper place on his thigh. She was slightly puzzled when she saw the look on the human’s face. He almost looked sad, maybe guilty, she couldn’t quite place it.

The human took a few steps toward the sullen engineer. He nudged the ash colored pegasus with the tip of his boot. “Cheer up some, brother.”

“Why? Your about to destroy a week’s worth of painstaking

research.” His tone was hardly friendly.

“True. But you can always send it off with a *bang*.”

“What do you mean?” His curiosity winning over his anger.

“Well, I got all this ammo to piss away, and, if you’ll notice, I was rather mute as to *how* we had to destroy it.” He grinned wolfishly. “Maybe one round at a time?”

Bolt grew a twisted grin of his own as he realized what Shane was implying.

~~~~~

The rattle of automatic gunfire echoed off the walls of the hangar, setting all the scientists on edge. At least, that coupled with the maniacal laughter of a certain ash colored engineer probably added to the effect.

Shane just watched the stallion with a proud smile. On the edge of the hangar doors the pegasus sat, squarely behind a belt fed human machine gun, spraying tracer rounds into the night sky. The glowing phosphorous rounds soared across the empty valley, showering the far side of the canyon in a fanciful display of red streaks.

Luna chuckled at the smirk on the human’s face.

“What?” Shane asked, still somewhat smiling.

“You boys and your toys,” she chided teasingly.

“Kid knows his shit.” Shane said again, nodding toward the stallion still happily burning through his own case of ammunition. Shane sighed nostalgically, “He reminds me of me.”

Luna rolled her eyes. Shane and the director had spent what seemed like hours jabbering about the various human rifles. Apparently, both of them shared quite the affinity for the machines. It was funny in a rather unusual way; weapons of war sparking friendships.

Luna soaked in much of the information as the result of sheer proximity. Each different style of rifle had its own name and tactical advantage. The assault rifle strapped across his back for example, was called an XM24, or '*Barracuda*' as he kept calling it. When Luna asked why they had named a weapon after a *fish*, he merely shrugged and said, "It sounds cool."

Shane seemed disturbingly attached to a certain weapon, with a large tubular barrel. Its name was SX-12, but he just kept calling it a shotgun. That is, if he wasn't busy cooing pet names to the weapon like it was his marefriend. Luna didn't know what made it special, from what she could tell it was an exact replica of its brother's.

Celestia magically lowered another box of ammunition in an organized stack. She and Luna had been helping Shane pack away the human arsenal into one of the empty alien shipping containers. Twilight kept careful record of exactly how many cases of various calibers and types were loaded, along with the exact numbers of weapons. She asked him why they bothered since he was going to destroy it all anyway.

"Gear accountability is paramount," was the only response she got, and he refused to elaborate further. She was beginning to suspect he didn't quite know himself.

Suddenly there was a curious absence of gunfire. Shane didn't bother looking up from the data pad he was tapping away on. "What the problem, chief?" he shouted in Bolt's general direction.

"Uh...I think I melted the barrel." He shouted back uncertainly. The tube at the front of the machine gun was indeed glowing cherry red.

"That's... actually impressive," Shane commented to Celestia absentmindedly. "That was Mil-PRF. You really gotta ride those things to melt the barrel." He leaned over and shouted back to Bolt, "Just come swap it for another one."

"Really?"

“Yeah, I’m gonna blow em’ up anyway. I don’t give a fuck,” he droned in reply.

Celestia resisted the urge to comment on his sudden change in attitude. He seemed much more... *calm*. Perhaps she should have given him a gun a long time ago. Which actually led her to her next thought. She noticed a few weapons had found their way off to the side, resting in a neat little stack by Shane’s bags.

“Major, what are you planning to do with those?” She pointed a golden hoof at the stack.

“Those stay with me,” he answered matter-of-factly.

“I thought you said you were going to destroy them,” she said, slightly annoyed.

“I’m not destroying *all* of them,” he replied with a small laugh. “I’m keeping those.”

“Why? I thought you said they were dangerous.”

“You know why parents don’t let their children play with matches? Because they’ll get *burned*.” He gestured to Celestia, “*Children*,” he then picked up an assault rifle from the deck, “*Matches*. Get it? They’re dangerous for *you*. Not me.”

“You said ‘*to myself or others*’.”

“Well, when *I’m* the one holding it, it’s not dangerous to me, and it’s only going to be dangerous to others if they are a threat. I like to believe I have the right to protect myself.”

“I don’t want these things in my country at all, Major. I agreed to this because I thought you were going to get rid of them. I’m uncomfortable with *you* toting weapons around my peaceful nation.”

He smiled, and set aside the data pad, apparently ready to argue in earnest. “Is your discomfort stemming from the *weapons*... or *me*?”

“The combination,” she replied dryly.

He chuckled. "I think you're *uncomfortable* that the playing field is getting just a tad more level," he accused. "You have numbers, you have magic, you have resources, and you have soldiers. I have my gun. I think this is a fair arrangement." Celestia was about to counter when he cut her off. "And before you argue, let me tell you what makes me *uncomfortable*." He took a step closer to the snow white alicorn. "I'm uncomfortable that at any moment any one of you fuckers can whisper a spell and toss me into a fucking tree. I'm *uncomfortable* with the fact that you've been keeping me on a leash. You are afraid of me. You think I'm unpredictable. So you compensate by trying to keep me under your thumb. I've tolerated it so far because it served my interests, but soon we're both going to have to make a choice. We can't both just sitting around waiting for the other to make a move. It's something neither of us can afford. I need your help, you need mine. I *want* to trust you. I really do. But how can I? This isn't my world. I don't know the rules here. I don't really *know* you or anyone else here. My heart says trust you, but then my brain reminds my heart of how often that's almost gotten me killed. So here I am....stuck."

"I do not know what to tell you, Shane. I find myself in an eerily similar situation. I wish to trust you, but, intentionally or not, you are a threat to my nation and her citizens."

Shane sighed deeply, his cold unblinking blue eyes fixated on the alicorn's glittering pink irises, as if staring long enough might somehow convey all that he could never understand of the snowy alicorn. "Alright, Princess. We do this here and now. I'm giving you my word that you have nothing to fear from me. If you show me that you trust me by letting me keep my guns, you will have earned my trust in return. In addition to the aid and services already rendered by your government, I am willing to extend a metaphorical olive branch. To consider you an allied nation, under the full protection of the United States Marine Corps ...which unfortunately is just me at the moment, but I digress.

I want us to be friends, Princess, and I promise you don't want us to be enemies. So here I am. I wish I had more than my word to give you, but I don't. So what do you say, Celestia. Are we friends?" Shane held an open hand to Celestia.

She scoured his eyes for traces of trickery, but could find none. He was being serious. She smiled slightly, “Do you really have the authority to authorize such a thing, Major?”

“I’m the highest ranking officer on the planet.” He reminded her with a grim smirk.

She delicately stepped out of her sparkling golden shoe, placing her pristine white hoof into the human’s callused hand. The corner of her lips raised in a smile, amused with the informality of the event. A simple hoofshake hardly seemed the appropriate gesture for such a weighty event. Perhaps the action held more significance in human society than in pony culture. She found herself suddenly eager to see what other surprises this odd creature would hold.

The Marine gripped Celestia’s hoof, giving it an imperative shake. He smiled back at the princess. “We have a deal then?” he asked arching an eyebrow.

“Yes, Major. I would be honored to count you among my allies.” He smiled back at the alicorn. “Although I must admit, I find myself curious of what manner of friend I’ve gained.”

His smile only widened, revealing a few white teeth. “None better, Highness.” He slapped her on the shoulder with his free hand and released Celestia’s hoof.

Celestia watched him stride back to his small pile of belongings. He plucked a few strange canisters from a pelican crate, stuffing them inside the assault pack which was quickly becoming swollen with whatever random pieces of gear the human decided were important.

Luna trotted up to her sister, with a smile. “Did I miss something? What was that all about?”

Celestia did her best to recap the conversation, trying to convey the strange shift in the human’s behavior. She threw in her own opinions about possible motives, but Luna seemed only to be growing upset from the story.

“Why do I always miss all the important moments?!” she complained.

“Because you’re always wandering off and finding some form of trouble to get into,” Celestia explained with a grin.

“I call the next one,” Luna declared, childishly. Celestia wouldn’t be surprised if she were serious.

~~~~~

“What are all these gizmos for again?” Pinkie asked, expertly balancing the barrel of a large rifle on her nose.

Twilight immediately snatched it away. “Don’t play with those Pinkie. Humans use them to kill each other,” Twilight explained, setting the rifle in the rack with all the others inside the shipping container.

“That’s silly,” Pinkie declared, “Humans are silly.”

“Silly.” Twilight mused, with a poorly hidden smile. The culmination of Celestia knows how many years of war and bloodshed, was silly. Pinkie was either being incredibly naïve, or she was stating something infinitely profound. Twilight couldn’t tell. She learned to stop trying to understand the reflections of her young pink friend.

Shane stepped into the container, followed by Rarity.

“Really?” Rarity cooed as she followed the human into the container.

“Hands down, *the* sexiest uniform you have ever laid eyes on,” he promised the starry eyed fashionista. “I’ll show you some day. You will flip your shit. I think I have an old copy of ‘*Leatherneck*’ in my bag somewhere. There’s bound to be a few pictures in there because I can’t draw worth a damn.”

“I shall hold you to that, Major.”

“Please do,” he added, sounding genuine. “What’s my count,



Sparkle?” he asked, somewhat surprising Twilight.

“Oh, um, well everything is loaded, but I’m afraid I’m still missing a few things,” she said, unhappy with the stubborn figures.

“You’re short two M45’s, one XM24, one Mk-7, one R-686, my SX-12, and a few cases of assorted ammunition, correct?” he asked poking away on his data pad.

“That’s right,” she was surprised he remembered it all.

“Good, we’re up.” He declared, reaching over and plucked a small canister from a crate. He smacked the top on an ammo crate, popping off the plastic lid. It looked strangely similar to a can of shaving cream.

Shane walked over to the first rack of weapons, aiming the nozzle of the canister squarely in the magazine well. He depressed the nozzle with his index finger, sending a stream of lime green foam into the weapon. The foam expanded rapidly, quickly oozing out any hole in the machine it could find. The foam dried considerably fast, hardening into a solid almost instantly.

He never released the button as he moved to the next rifle, leaving a rapidly hardening bridge of foam between the two.

Twilight watched, fascinated as he moved down the line dousing each rifle in the strange lime-green foam. It seemed a slightly anticlimactic way to destroy the weapons, but she wasn’t complaining.

A few minutes and about half a dozen cans later, the inside of the container was a spider web of green. He even sprayed the insides of the ammunition crates with the expansive substance. Shane discarded what was left of a canister, tossing it into the crate. He produced a handful of tiny silver pins, pushing the strange little silver thumb tacks into the hardened foam at what seemed like random points.

He turned and dug through his pack for a few seconds. He produced a small hand-held device. It was nothing more than a handgrip,

housing a small button trigger and a thin black antenna.

Shane flipped a cap on the device in his hand, exposing a small switch, making sure to keep his index finger off the trigger. The primed thumb tacks glowed soft red. It was almost like a nightmarish, foamy version of Hearth's Warming lights. Shane closed the cap, and the lights flickered out.

"What's all that...gooey stuff?" Rainbow asked, hovering next to Shane's head and peering into the crate.

"An *oxygen-reactive foaming, semi-solid adhesive det resin.*"

"Oh.....what's that mean?"

"I have *no* idea. I just make it go boom," he admitted.

"...boom?" Twilight confirmed.

Shane sighed, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. "Yeah, it's some kinda RDX variant. Someone much smarter than myself figured out how to...like...make it all foamy and put it in a can. Its actually technically a liquid when its in the can, it reacts with air and hardens. Much more convenient than carrying around bricks of C4."

"RDX?" Twilight continued to prod, growing nervous.

"Or 'C-7,' depending on who you ask. Its chemical name is like...cyclotrimethawabablaberry or something equally frustrating to pronounce," he panned.

Twilight frowned. "Is it...*stable*?"

Shane smiled. "It is *right now*."

Twilight had heard enough. "*Priiincess!* Shane made a giant bomb!"

"...wow you *would* tattle." Shane panned, sealing the container doors shut.

"What's the matter, Twilight?" Celestia sighed on her approach,

well aware of her student's penchant for over exaggeration.

"Shane's going to blow up the container." She told the approaching alicorn.

"I am well aware of the Major's intentions, Twilight," Celestia soothed.

"What? Did you think I was just going to *wish* them away?" Shane mocked.

"There has to be a less...extreme way to do it," she reasoned.

"Not as fun though," the human mumbled.

"I've offered," Celestia continued. "Major Doran, declined. I have given him permission to do as he wishes with them. Although I would have preferred you not do it *here*."

"I'm not setting it off in *here*," he noted with a hint of annoyance.

"Where do you intend to *set it off* then?"

"You guys, are going to use your magnets, and we're gonna chuck it out the front door," he beamed.

"Magic. Is. Not. Magnets." Twilight corrected, infinitely irritated by the prospect.

Shane ruffled her mane, chuckling. He sighed happily. "Yes it is."

She pushed away his hand. Already formatting the grand magic lecture she was going to blast him with the moment events allowed.

"Whoops. Almost forgot." Shane stuck two fingers in his mouth, whistling loud enough to hurt Twilight's ears.

The rattle of the machine gun fire ceased momentarily as the Director turned to identify the source of the whistle. Shane waved him down with some sort of sweeping arm gesture that Celestia could only assume meant "knock it off".

Bolt stood up, grabbing the still smoking Mk-7 by the carrying handle. He flapped into the air, straining only slightly with the heavy weapon. He landed a few paces away trotting up to the group, careful to keep the barrel pointed in a safe direction.

Shane relieved the stallion of the machine gun, resting the bulky weapon over his shoulder with a smile. “Satisfied?”

Bolt inhaled, composing himself, clearing his throat. “Yes. Thank you. I must say, I still think it’s a mistake to destroy such elegant machines.”

“Heartbreaking,” Shane commented, “I agree. But I can’t loophole my way out of this. Even if I could, I wouldn’t. Last thing I need is CNN doing some piece about how the heartless Marines are arming the shit out of impressionable, underdeveloped nations.”

“...*underdeveloped*?” Luna panned.

Shane cracked open the door to the shipping container, taking the Mk-7 off his shoulder and unceremoniously chucking it in. He shut the door, locking it in place. He smacked his hands together rubbing them together voraciously. “Alright, who wants to see a shit load of taxpayer’s money go up in a big fiery ball?!”

~~~~~

The shipping container floated out the enormous hangar doors, gliding silently through the golden haze of Celestia’s magic. It sailed steadily into the night, out into the empty space of the canyon. An ordinary unicorn would have likely passed out from such a feat of magic. The container must have weighed close to a ton, and Celestia hadn’t even broken a sweat.

The cliff face dropped away, leaving the container hanging out over a considerable drop of expansive forest. Celestia pushed the large box out further into the canyon. They watched as the softly glowing container sailed into the night air. It must have been almost a mile away before the human spoke up.

“That’s good. Set it down.”

Celestia nodded, and the crate lowered itself, slowly pushing its way through the upper canopy of trees. Soon only the glow of Celestia's magic could be seen shining through the leaves.

Celestia severed the spell, and the soft golden glow of celestial magic winked out in the distance.

Shane pulled out the same hand held antenna device from earlier. It looked like a hand grip and trigger from one of his rifles, minus the rest of the weapon.

Grinning like a foal with a present, he began to speak, "I would just like to take a moment to dedicate this detonation to the United States Marine Corps. Proving, once again, that not even the constraints of the physical universe can keep us from blowing something up."

"Poetic," Luna noted, somewhat sarcastically.

Shane ignored her, flicking the safety cap off the trigger. The girls all stared into the darkness expectantly. "Hang on to your horseshoes, ladies."

The trigger clicked sharply. The ground shook slightly as a chunk of forest immediately ceased to exist as it was engulfed in a brilliant display of fire and shrapnel. The shockwave could be seen screaming away from the epicenter in all directions. The shock closed the distance to the hangar in seconds. Twilight felt like someone had slapped her across the face when it finally hit, bringing with it the deafening roar of the explosion. The entire building rocked with the concussion, even knocking dust from the high rafters.

Shane put two victorious fists in the air, laughing like he was staring at the fiery manifestation of the funniest joke ever told.

"Oooooooh!" Pinkie cooed, amazedly, "Pretty!"

Rarity was all in a tiff as the concussion knocked a few expertly styled curls out of place in her rich purple mane.

The conflagration began to fade into a pillar of swirling black

smoke, and settling debris. Shane's enthusiasm settled with it, his laughter dying to a chuckle. "Ah man. That was great." He let out a contented sigh, "Alright, fun's over. Back to work."

"Aaaawww," Pinkie visibly deflated.

Shane ruffled her bubblegum colored curls, "I know. Work sucks. But we can't just dick around all night, we got stuff to do." Pinkie didn't seem overly convinced. "Tell you what. If you help me get done sooner, I'll show you how to make an MRE bomb."

"No!" Twilight started, but it was too late.

"Yay!" Pinkie hopped around before leaping up onto his back, wrapping her forelegs around his head, and nearly knocking the both of them over. "Onward!" Pinkie declared proudly as she piggy backed on the human, almost knocking them both over.

Twilight's jaw fell, horrified that her friend had surely just signed her own death warrant. She was just about to magically teleport her pink friend to safety, when a strange noise caught her attention. He was....*laughing*.

He reached up and removed the mare's forelegs from around his face, shifting them down so they wrapped around his neck, freeing his eyes and mouth. He was indeed chuckling. Twilight had no words. She was absolutely certain that such an action would have been the height of folly for anypony else.

Shane laughed out a few words, "I don't know what the fuck you're *on* but it must be some heavy stuff."

"I'm on *you*, silly!"

He shook his head, muttering. "In Soviet Russia, horse...aw fuck it, you guys wouldn't get the reference anyway." Shane turned and started back toward his gear. He stopped in the middle of a step, fixing Bolt with a curious stare, "...the fucks wrong with you?"

Bolt was struggling to fold his wings back down to his sides. The feathery appendages stuck stubbornly out, refusing to cooperate.

“Oh my...” Fluttershy murmured behind a yellow hoof.

Rainbow Dash immediately burst into a fit of sparsely controlled laughter. “I like fireworks too but jeez,”

“Shut up! It’s not what it looks like,” the grey pegasus defended resolutely, although the slight blush in his face betrayed him.

Shane shook his head, apparently deciding the event wasn’t worth the time. He strode back to his pile of gear, still toting his giggling pink charge. He had accumulated a small arsenal of various supplies. Aside from the obvious, none of it looked overly dangerous.

Shane crouched, allowing Pinkie Pie to hop to the ground, which she did somewhat reluctantly. He then immediately went to work sorting through his pile of gear. He loaded various articles into his bags with the precision of one who had done it many times before. He strapped a large Kevlar helmet to the side of his assault pack. On it was a device looking somewhat like futuristic electronic binoculars, along with a set of polarized goggles which were protected by a sleeve of fabric.

“Oh wait!” Bolt suddenly exclaimed before disappearing in a small blur of feathers. Shane cocked an eyebrow at Luna, but she merely shrugged, just as confused.

Shane shook it off. He reached over his shoulder, grabbing for the pistol grip on the Barracuda, slung across his back. He cradled the weapon as he walked over to the black pelican crate of ammunition. He flipped the two latches, popping open the top. He pulled out a smaller plastic olive drab case, marked with white lettering. ‘6.8x 47mm NATO’. Another latch and the container opened to reveal several shimmering brass rounds, all neatly stacked on ten round stripper clips.

Shane detached the magazine from his rifle, retrieving two more from his bag. He plopped himself down on the floor and beginning the tedious looking task of filling the empty magazine with bullets, one round at a time.

Luna watched him work, apprehension growing in her stomach. She knew full well that every bullet he pushed into the magazine was another life, potentially cut short. She didn't like it. But this was the deal. She kept telling herself that it was all in the name of equality. This was the fair solution. They had numbers and magic, He had immediate lethality. She didn't need to be an expert to know a bullet could be let loose much more quickly and effectively than most spells. But such an action would lead to his inevitable demise, for no matter how fast or effective, he was still just one man. He would never survive if he decided to turn on the Equestrians. He had to know that. Luna could only assume that it was never an issue of *winning* for him, but rather, how many he was going to take with him.

Shane pushed one of the three, now filled, magazines into the well of the rifle giving the bottom a quick smack to ensure it was seated properly. He tucked the other two into long pockets on the front of his body armor, re-slinging the rifle across his back.

With a grunt he sat on the pelican crate. He leaned over and picked his shotgun off the deck, resting it across his lap affectionately. He fished around in his assault pack for a few moments. He paused, letting out an irritated groan, and pulling out a pair of sleek sunglasses. One of the polarized lenses was webbed with cracks.

"...ffffuck," Shane muttered. "*I liked these.*"

"Can't you replace the lens?" Luna suggested.

"I don't have any replacements, and I doubt there's an Oakley distributor nearby." He stared at his sunglasses somberly. "Three hundred dollar frames," he commented bitingly, before tossing them on the ground with a slight plastic clatter.

Twilight padded over, lifting the sunglasses with her magic. With hardly any effort at all, the spell sealed the cracks in the lens until its glossy polarized surface shined like new. She levitated them back over to the human, who plucked them from the purple aura with a noticeable grin.

He turned the frames over in his fingers, inspecting the sunglasses,



and shaking his head slightly, in amused disbelief. “Fuckin’ magnets,” he cooed softly, giving Twilight a thankful smile.

A pair of unicorns approached at Bolt’s direction, levitating a heavy green case. “*Gently*,” he reminded the two.

The crate lowered to the deck with a soft thud. It was almost identical to all the other containers that littered the hangar. But this one lacked the simple metal latches the others had. Instead a small screen and number pad took their place.

“What is this?” Celestia asked, confused.

“One last thing,” Bolt started, “It has some numerical locking device. We haven’t been able to get it open. I was hoping *he* might be able to.”

“Why didn’t you just cut it open?” Luna asked.

“We don’t know what’s inside. I didn’t want to potentially damage something.”

Shane stepped forward, eyeing the crate curiously.

“What is it?” Celestia asked the human.

“I dunno,” he admitted. “I’m not supply.” He kicked the crate experimentally with his boot. He leaned down and tapped a few keys on the number pad. A little red light winked in response. The case remained locked. “I got an idea,” Shane said turning and padding over to his pack.

Celestia stepped up to the case, gingerly tapping random numbers on the pad. The red light winked back at her stubbornly. She could easily set up a spell to continuously type possible combinations of numbers into the lock, but it would be impossible to tell how long it would take to work.

The sound of a charging handle being racked broke Celestia from her thoughts.

“*Move*,” Shane ordered, leveling the barrel of his shotgun at the

lock.

As soon as Celestia scurried out of the way, a deafening boom roared through the hangar as Shane blew a sizable chunk out of the locking mechanism.

Celestia shot him a furious glare, which he returned with a friendly smile.

Shane flipped open the lid with the barrel of his shotgun. The lid fell back exposing the contents for all to see.

Shane chuckled happily, “There *is* a god.”

# ARTICLE 2 Part XI

## ARTICLE 2

### Part XI

By: Muppetz

~~~~~

The smell of gunpowder filled her nostrils as Luna stepped over. The crate was filled with random boxes; all marked with brightly colored labels. The first she noticed was a large red and white cardboard carton with bold lettering that read “Marlboro”.

“Sweet *merciful Jesus*.” Shane reached down and plucked a carton from the crate. He tore open an end and dumped out several dozen much tinier boxes. He grabbed one; tearing off its protective plastic wrapping. He flipped the lid grabbing a slender white paper stick with his teeth. He practically skipped over to his pack; digging a plain silver light out of a pocket before setting the stick in his mouth on fire.

He sucked on the orange end of the smoldering paper stick, exhaling a cloud of bluish smoke which drifted lazily off toward the rafters.

“What in the name of Equestria are you doing?!” Twilight asked infinitely confused by this behavior.

“What does it look like?” He mumbled before taking another long drag, dreamily blowing twin jets of smoke from his nostrils. The acrid smell filled Twilight’s nose. It smelled chemical and dry.

Pinkie tittered lightly at the spectacle, “He’s just like Spike!”

Bolt had one of the packages in his hoof eagerly examining the box carefully. “STOP!” He zipped over to Shane swatting the smoking stick out of the human’s mouth.

“Hey!” Shane cried angrily.

“Those are toxic!” He flapped over and stomped on the still smoldering poison stick, extinguishing the toxic fumes that were still drifting from the tip. “Good thing I read the label. You almost breathed that st- WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?” he cried as he turned to see Shane igniting another stick.

“It’s a cigarette, dipshit. It’s SUPPOSED to be full of toxins. Thankfully one of these *wondrous* little toxins is called nicotine. You inhale the smoke and it gets into the bloodstream and hits the brain with a buzz that’s ...just fantastic.”

There wasn’t a closed jaw in the room. Everypony stared at the human like he had lost his mind.

“You realize that could *kill* you, correct?” Bolt affirmed.

He raised the slender stick to his lips, taking another deep drag on the cigarette. He closed his eyes rolling his head back and blew a billowing cloud of grayish blue smoke toward the ceiling. His head came back down, opening at the ponies and smiling. “Didn’t she tell you?” he nodded toward Celestia, still smiling. “I already died.” Thin trails of leftover smoke slipped past his teeth as he spoke. He chuckled at the still flabbergasted faces of his equine audience. Even Celestia’s regal mouth was hanging loose at the turn. “You want one?” He proffered the pack to the group.

Pinkie raised her hoof. “I do!”

“NO!” the other five immediately shot her down, causing the pink mare to shrink back a bit.

Celestia finally regained her composure, unsure of how to handle this. “Major, I admit that I am hardly the authority on human customs, but I can’t help but be worried about this. If you *know* they’re dangerous, why continue to do it”

“A psychologist would probably feed you some bullshit about me having some repressed masochistic tendency for self destruction,” he nodded, casually taking another puff, “But the short answer is

that they are highly addicting. In my line of work, long term health concerns are usually the last thing on our minds. Nicotine helps take the edge off, keeps me somewhat calm. And that is good for everybody.”

Celestia eyed him with suspicious disapproval. “Very well, Major. You are apparently an adult and I suppose you are capable of making your own decisions. But please know that this *habit* is very disturbing to me, and I would implore you to quit as soon as possible. I’m sure I could schedule an appointment with a substance abuse counselor.”

“Aw, are you worried about me, Princess?” Shane teased.

“Let’s just say I have a vested interest in your continued good health,” she answered with a small grin.

“That’s so sweet,” he said with his typical sarcasm, “but how about this. You can worry about you, and I will worry about me. Deal? Good.” He turned and grabbed an armful of Marlboro cartons. He dumped them unceremoniously into his pelican crate. What space was not occupied by ammunition was quickly filled with cigarettes and the boxes of colored plastic tubes.

Celestia didn’t feel like arguing about it right now. She just planned to strategically nag him about it until he decided it wasn’t worth the trouble.

“Ho-lee shit!” He exclaimed as he continued to dig in the crate. He pulled out two white packages with calligraphic writing spelling out ‘*Jack Daniels*’ in flowing script. They appeared to be filled with some sort of powder but Shane looked at them like they were made of diamonds. She swore she saw tears brimming in his eyes.

“It’s just like fuckin’ Christmas!” he hopped over to his assault pack. “We’re saving these for a special occasion,” he idly commented, tucking them safely inside.

He went back to the container, pulling out a few plain white boxes, emblazoned with a small blood red symbol Celestia recognized as medical label.

“Why was it all locked up like this?” Twilight asked.

Shane popped one open, letting out a satisfied whistle. “Because *this* is where they kept the good stuff, otherwise known as *controlled substances*.”

The box was filled with slender capped tubes, a bit shorter in length than a quill. They came in a variety of colors, purple, red, green, and a few yellow ones. Each colored label spelling out minuscule paragraphs that were too small for Celestia to read without her glasses. “Chems, stims, morphine,” he murmured to himself. Shane tapped a few idly. “...antibiotics, adrenaline...” He stared at the crate of human treasures for a moment. “I don’t think I have room in my bag for all this,” Shane started, disappointment evident in his speech.

“Is it important?” Luna asked curiously, lifting one of the purple tubes, squinting to read the unreasonably tiny print.

**CPP-(AutoInj.)**

1000mg *Acetaminophen*

15mg *Meloxicam*

400mg *Moxifloxacin*

“*Kinda*,” he droned. Plucking the purple plastic tube from a cloud of Luna’s magic before she could read on.

“We can take it with us. Another box isn’t going to make much of a difference.” Luna offered.

“Really?”

“I don’t see why not. I’m actually surprised you aren’t taking more.”

“Traditionally speaking I prefer to travel as lightly as possible... that said, I’m also used to having the luxury of resupplies. Somethin’ tells me that’s not gonna happen out here.”

“Well are you going to *blow it up* if we don’t take it?”

“No,” he almost laughed.

“Why not? You seemed pretty adamant about not sharing before,” Luna teased.

“Not sharing *weapons*,” he corrected. “This is different. I don’t care if you guys want in on some of these. It’s medical. At that point I think it becomes humanitarian aid. I don’t know exactly how far your magic can take you healthcare wise. You all seem like you got a pretty good handle on it, but I’d have no problem with you guys studying some of the medical tech. Maybe you’ll learn something and be able to save some lives.”

Celestia was actually touched. Every time she thought she had him figured out he pulled something like this. “Are you allowed to do that?”

“Why not?” he shrugged, “We hand out medical aid and supplies on humanitarian missions all the time. Consider it an act of diplomatic good will,” He smiled.

“How kind,” Celestia laughed, amused, but genuinely appreciative of the gesture.

“I take care of my own, Princess,” he smiled back. “But before you make me out to be a saint, know that I came here fully prepared to burn this building to the ground.”

“Don’t worry. You were *never* in danger of being labeled a saint,” Luna jabbed.

He chuckled.

“So what about that?” Twilight finally interjected, pointing a hoof back at the monolithic twisted spacecraft.

“What about it?” Shane asked.

“Well, what should we do with it?”

“Do whatever. I don’t want it,” he said dismissively.

“Aren’t you worried about it like...advancing our technological development too rapidly or something?”

“No. There’s *nothing there*. It’s a metal husk. Go nuts. The engines exploded in orbit, we weren’t carrying spare parts, the only thing left is *half* of a slipspace drive. The pieces of which, that *are* left, are well beyond fucked. And if you want me to be brutally honest, I don’t think you guys could figure it out if you wanted to.” Luna snorted slightly at the remark.

Twilight didn’t have much of an answer so she settled back down into contemplative silence

Luna hated to admit it, but he wasn’t exactly wrong. The chances they would be able to piece the mysteries of the twisted metal vehicle back together were laughably small. And the odds of getting it to function beyond the theoretical were even more so. “Wait,” she halted, as his a few of his words sank in. “You weren’t carrying spare parts?”

“Nope.”

“Why in the world would you not bring spare parts? What if something went wrong? How would you fix it.”

“We wouldn’t,” he deadpanned, sounding appropriately unhappy about the notion.

“Then what *would* you do.”

“Die, probably,” he said far too casually. “Apparently the operation was too high risk to jeopardize losing more equipment. That slipspace engine is probably the most expensive thing mankind has ever created. They didn’t want to risk losing another one if shit went sideways.”

Luna almost laughed. “So in an effort to reduce potential losses... they deny you the equipment you would need to avert a potential loss.”

“Kind of a bitch, ain’t it?”



Luna was actually having difficulty giving voice to her bewilderment. "That...is absurd to the point of being outright offensive."

"The Suck...*Welcome to it*," he replied cryptically pulling another cigarette from the box and igniting it with his silver metal lighter.

"Come to think of it, a lot about this doesn't sit very well with me," Luna continued. "What was the purpose of this mission? Why were you carrying such strange cargo? Too much of this doesn't make sense. Even beyond the scope of flawed government bureaucracy. Any being capable of even the most remote intelligence could see the illogicality of all this. What were your people doing, Major? " Luna finally demanded.

Shane drew a long burn on his cigarette, exhaling it thoughtfully. His face became grave, as if he were deciding on something dangerously final. He sighed apprehensively. "If I had to guess...I'd say you're looking at humanity's early attempts at a colonization project."

The group became quiet, all acutely aware that this wasn't something he was comfortable doing. Nevertheless Celestia felt obligated to interject. "You guess?"

He nodded, "I have my assumptions. The actual mission objectives were well above my pay grade," he leaned in slightly, "Which is saying something. I make a pretty decent living, if you know what I mean."

She did, but she continued anyway. "They sent you on this mission and didn't even tell you why?"

"They didn't tell ME why; I'm sure *someone* knew."

"I still don't understand the reasoning."

He exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Me neither."

"If this is all so secretive why are you telling us all this?" Celestia asked.

"I was never privy to mission directives. So technically I'm not leaking information. This is all just me thinking out loud. The only reason I know as much as I do is because I have nasty habit of sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. My orders were basically just 'tag along'. Myself, and two other Marines on board, we're told to speculate and plan for the possibilities of future missions. Just train in zero G, watch, learn, and just kinda see what it's like. If I had to guess I'd say, when we got back, they were going to put us in charge of training more security forces if they ever wanted to launch a full scale surface landing. Everyone else on board was either Naval or civilian contracted scientists, mechanics, or whatever.

This was all just supposed to be a dry run. That ship could carry over sixty people if it had to. We crewed it with *eleven*. I think they just wanted to make sure the ship could make a jump with all its rattle. You know, make sure none of the gear reacted to a slipspace rupture, and...you know... to see if the crew would survive."

"You were guinea pigs," Twilight breathed, still slightly shocked.

"...pretty much."

"You *knew* this and yet you did it anyway?!"

"That's what they pay me for. I get orders, I carry out orders."

"Like a loyal little war hound," Luna mocked.

He blew a jet of smoke at the lunar princess. "*Woof*."

Luna flapped an indigo wing at the smoke, trying her best not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cough. This habit of his was going to be a problem.

"Well what about the rest of the stuff? All this technology? You don't care that we see all that? I thought like...half of your motivation here was to keep us on the right technological chronology."

"There isn't much left. Everything I though was *dangerous* is in about a zillion pieces at the bottom of a crater. I have virtually

everything that isn't. I don't think some wires, circuitry, and outdated blackboards are gonna spark some industrial revolution. I don't even see why you would *want* to. It's not like you *need* any of this. You aren't stupid so there's obviously a reason you didn't already develop this stuff yourselves. *You never needed to.* You'd be wasting a whole lot of time and resources on something you can all probably already do with magic. I mean what's the worst you're gonna do with it, *send me emails?*" he punctuated with an over exaggerated look of fear. "I guess I could destroy it just out of spite that you didn't actually develop it yourselves but I guess I'm just not that petty." He looked back over the leftovers. "Keep it, learn from it. Call it a gift. I may not be ready to arm you all just yet, but as allies I can't have you embarrassing me in front of all the other dimensions." He teased. "Welcome to the modern age."

Celestia gazed over the alien prizes the human had just left to her care. The gesture meant more than the human probably knew. An 'industrial revolution' is *exactly* what this could spark. This stuff may have been commonplace in the world he came from. But such technology if successfully marketed could in fact make somepony insanely wealthy. At the time, virtually all complicated machinery was reliant solely on magically charged gemstones. A process that was complex, expensive, and solely reliant on high level unicorn magic. The implications made Celestia's head spin. A society where *everypony* had access to advanced technologies. Bulky and complicated equipment now packed into a hoof-held device. Machines that no longer required gem-fueled spell matrices. The market would be flipped overnight. It would change the face of society. Business, economy, the very fabric of Equestria, if not handled carefully.

Twilight spoke softly as if unsure how to phrase it. "...aren't you worried about us, you know...becoming a threat?"

It took him a split moment to register her words. He startled the entire room when he started laughing. He continued to chuckle boisterously, much to the chagrin of a blushing Twilight. "Yeah, be careful. You might *cute* someone to death."

"Why you little!" Applejack caught Rainbow Dash's tail just in time before she could flying tackle the laughing human. Shane didn't

seem to notice.

“Ah man,” he started to calm down, still chuckling slightly. “I needed that.”

“Well isn’t that why you destroyed all the weapons?!” Twilight demanded, stomping a hoof, very offended by the outburst.

“Sure but *come on*. That was practically a formality. *Standard procedure*. I don’t know anything about this place. You all seem nice enough but I don’t know your politics or history or disposition. How do I know your not about to go off start a war with the ponies next door? It’d be a slaughter. I’m not gonna be the guy that started that. “I’m only keeping *my* guns to protect myself.”

“From what?” Twilight drilled.

“*You*,” he said far too easily. He smiled down at Twilight’s stunned visage. “Don’t act surprised. I’ve known you for all of about two days. That’s not exactly an ideal span to develop and informed opinion.”

“What happened to trust?” Twilight said with a frown.

“Don’t go making this about trust again,” he rolled his eyes. “I do trust you. If I didn’t I wouldn’t be here right now. I just dropped out of the sky into a world of strangeness and magic the likes of which I will probably never understand. I don’t know what’s out there.” He gestured vaguely to the rest of the world. “I’m not giving anybody any weapons.” He leaned a little closer to Twilight. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. Guns *ain’t* that tough to figure out. If you actually had the need to build a better death machine, you’d have done it by now. You said it yourself. ‘*A safe little peaceful nation*’. I’m in a world I know nothing about. So I’m removing the wildcard of weaponry from our already overly complicated hand. I assume there are other nations *other* than yours on this rock?”

“Yes, of course,” Twilight confirmed.

“If I had landed in *their* backyard and then you found out I was arming *them* to the teeth with some alien killing machines... I don’t

know about *you* but I'd probably wig the hell out and do something drastic. I'm playing the big picture here, and I'm not about to go paint a target on the back your heads, OR piss off whoever lives next door."

"You seem awfully confident." Luna noted. "How are you so sure *we* won't turn on *you*?"

He smiled strangely. "Insurance plan number one," He tapped his shotgun lovingly.

"You don't seriously think that you alone pose a threat to an entire nation." Twilight pointed out.

"No," he admitted. "But I'm confident enough that I make a mess big and bloody enough to make it not worth the effort."

Luna's ears perked as the human voiced her thoughts from earlier.

"You take such twisted pride in your own brutality. I cannot help myself but wonder what goes on inside your head." Luna noted coldly.

Shane took a long drag on his cigarette, drawing the hot ashen haze into his lungs. "You *really* don't wanna know."

"Are all humans are so violent then?"

"No," he dismissed annoyed, "If you're using the words '*all*' and '*humans*' in the same sentence, you're wrong. Very few humans are inherently violent. In my experience, most humans will do just about anything to avoid a fight. Unfortunately such a social schema tends not to bode well for the survival of a species. We didn't have a choice. We didn't grow up on '*Planet Rainbow Sunshine*'. We've been fighting a war of survival for hundreds of thousands of years on a planet that did everything in its power to snuff the life out of us. It was get good at killing or die. So that's where people like me come in," he patted himself on the front of his armor. "We do the dirty work so that the rest of the world gets to be happy, safe and ignorant. So do please spare me the hippie shit."

"I've no argument against self preservation," Luna replied, her

words holding an edge that only thousands of years of sisterly familiarity allowed Celestia to pick up on. “but when it becomes a glorious pursuit rather than a gruesome necessity I’d begin to grow concerned for the mental states of those involved.”

“Yeah, great. When I need a lesson on *Just War Theory* from some pacifist pony princesses, I’ll be sure to come straight to you,” the human mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Shane said innocently.

As much as Celestia wanted him to elaborate she felt compelled to interrupt. “There is clearly still much we have to learn about one another. Let us each agree that we have both adapted as best we could to the world in which we live and leave it at that for now,” she looked out into the night. “The dawn is coming. It would be wise to get moving.” Celestia severed the argument before someone said something regrettable.

Shane ground a cigarette butt under the heel of his boot before nodding, ready to go.

“Major,” Celestia continued, “This will most likely be the last time we can visit here again for quite some time. Do you have everything you need?”

He looked over his shoulder, eyes lingering on the broken ship.

“Yeah. Let’s go.” He walked over to his bags selecting the last of the three rifles he decided to keep. It was much longer than the other two. The long telescope on the top giving it a somewhat unusual appearance. Shane popped a few pins out of the sides breaking the long weapon down into smaller sections, which he carefully tucked inside his pelican crate, before closing it and snapping the latches shut. He adjusted the assault rifle toward his side so that he could wear his pack without obstruction.

After donning the tan pack, and hooking an arm through a strap on his sea bag, he was beginning to look much like a fully loaded pack

mule. He tried to lean down to pick up his precious shotgun, but he seemed to be having some difficulty bending over under all the weight.

Luna let him struggle for a short moment, the more sinister side of her enjoying the brief moment of weakness, especially after he called her a ‘hippy’. She lifted the weapon off the deck, and into his outstretched hands.

“Thanks.” He flashed a small smile after realizing what had just occurred.

“Don’t mention it,” she replied with a flip of her astral tail.

~~~~~

Both of Shane’s crates settled delicately onto the back of Celestia’s carriage. The Princess of the sun spent a rather long time arranging the containment of the rest of the leftover alien hardware. As soon as they assured it wasn’t dangerous, she instructed the research staff to lock it away. She couldn’t in all good consciousness destroy it as the human had suggested, it was too valuable. But its secrets were too revolutionary to spring on an unprepared Equestria. Goodness knows they were going to have enough on their plates as it is. No. Deep underground is where it would stay for the time being.

“Yeah...no,” Shane eyed Celestia’s carriage dubiously from under the low brim of his newly donned eight point cover.

“Stop being a baby,” Luna scolded, frustrated.

“I’m not getting back on that thing,” he marked resolutely.

“Well then how do you expect to get back?” she demanded. Shane had no answer he just kept eyeing the carriage with poorly concealed fear. Luna brightened as an idea struck her. “Very well, Major. I didn’t want to do this but...” she beckoned him closer with a hoof, looking around secretively.

Shane leaned down compliantly, instantly curious.

Luna spoke in a hushed tone. “What if I told you I could get you

back to the castle in the blink of an eye. You won't have to get back on the carriage and you won't have to lift a finger."

"I'd say you have my attention."

"It's not for the faint of heart," she cautioned theatrically,

"...Go on."

"Luna what are you doing?" Celestia broke in with worry in her voice.

"He's a big boy, Celestia. I'm sure he can handle it." She dismissed. "Unless," she added with a furtive smile, "You doubt yourself."

Shane snorted, insulted. "Do it," he challenged.

"Are you suuure?"

"Do. It." He repeated sternly.

"So be it. Come," she beckoned with a hoof.

He leaned down to the alicorn's eye level.

"Closer," she encouraged.

He inched nearer the princess.

"*Closer*," she repeated.

He frowned but complied until his nose was almost touching Luna's. His muted blues staring into her bottomless sapphires with poorly concealed apprehension.

Luna smiled and twitched her head, tapping him on the head with her horn as a jolt of magic flashed.

Like a stringless puppet, Shane collapsed on the deck. His unconscious form crumpled at Luna's hooves, fast asleep. She beamed proudly over him.

Smiling happily, Luna scooped her human up on a cloud of starry



magic and dumped him unceremoniously into the carriage. Pinkie Pie found the trickery highly amusing.

Celestia's hoof met her forehead. Luna's cavalier attitude was going to come back to bite her at some point. She would have to have a talk with her sister about it very soon, but for now, they needed to get back to the castle. Already Celestia was feeling the unmistakable pull that told her the sun would soon need raising.

Celestia stepped into her carriage. Luna had propped the human against the back, arranging his unconscious form so that he appeared to be merely napping. "He's not going to be happy when he wakes up, you know," Celestia warned.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Luna smiled knowingly.

Celestia shook her head, unwilling to argue about it as the carriage began to move slowly toward the edge of the hangar. It sailed out into open air, diving down into the valley before leveling off and soaring into the still starry sky.

The ride back was relatively quiet. Shane was still out cold, sleeping deeply at Celestia's hooves. All the girls were lost in their own thoughts. Luna stared into the expanse of night sky, no longer wearing her smug smile.

The amused titter of Pinkie Pie's laughter broke the growing wall of silence. "Aaaw, look," she pranced over to the sleeping human staring at him amusedly. She pointed a hoof at his boots, which were twitching rhythmically. "He's dreaming he's running!"

No sooner than the words were spoken that Celestia cast an alarmed glance at her baby sister, who was still studiously staring into the night.

"Aww, ain't that cute? Look at 'im go." AJ chuckled.

"Humans can dream?" Dash interjected, sounding genuinely surprised by the prospect. "I thought only ponies could dream."

"Even dogs dream, Dash," Twilight noted, "I wonder what a human dreams about," Twilight mused out loud.

Luna finally broke out of her disinterested trance and her eyes glazed over the prone form of the sleeping human. "...It's a nightmare, actually." Luna noted quietly, returning her gaze into the distance, no traces of her former frivolity remained.

All the girls looked to the lunar princess, waiting eagerly for some form of explanation. None of them knew how the princess could have possibly known. But the powers of an alicorn were hardly something one applied reason to.

Celestia rested a golden hoof the human's shoulder, comfortingly, but it didn't seem to help. He continued to grimace and twitch in his sleep, as he fought with whatever unconscious demons assault the dreams of slumbering humans.

The rest of the trip was silent. No longer was anypony laughing at the subtle twitches or unconscious reflexes of the sleeping human.

~~~~~

# ARTICLE 2 Part XII

## ARTICLE 2

### Part XII

By: Muppetz

The golden carriage landed with a subtle bump as it alighted in the castle court yard.

Shane jolted awake as they came to a halt. He looked around wide eyed and clearly confused. "What happened?" he mumbled, apparently attempting to shake off his drowsiness.

"I knocked you out." Luna said flatly

"Why?" he asked puzzled.

"I couldn't let you walk back, so I put you to sleep for the ride home."

"...oh," Shane rubbed his head. He sat upright. "Thanks."

"You gave me no choi- *Thanks*? You're not mad?"

"I'm not *happy*," he assured, still rubbing his eyes. "I mean shit, I probably would have *let* you do it if you just *asked first*," he shot her an annoyed glance, "But seeing as you cared enough to apply peer pressure..." He smiled, seeming strangely okay with Luna's trickery.

Luna fumbled for a noticeable span, exchanging looks with Twilight Sparkle. Twilight merely shrugged, no closer to understanding than the princess. Appreciation was the *last* thing she expected from the human. "You're...welcome," Luna eventually stammered, mentally congratulating herself. She had to admit she was fully prepared for the human's wrath.

"I thought you'd be....angrier," Luna said somewhat haltingly.

He stretched, arching his back like a cat, and smiled. "Compared to the stuff you're normally doing to me, the sweet embrace of unconsciousness sounds like a pretty beguiling prospect." Luna rolled her eyes at what she considered to be a grievous over exaggeration. He stretched again rolling his broad shoulders and cracking his neck, causing Twilight to shudder and groan.

"Have any interesting dreams?" she asked casually.

"No," he either lied, or genuinely didn't remember "Are we back then?" He continued, sitting up in the carriage and inspecting his new surroundings..

"We are indeed," Luna confirmed a nod.

"And not a moment to soon," Celestia cut in, dismounting her golden carriage. "If you will excuse me, I must go and raise the sun."

She trotted a few paces into the open courtyard, closing her eyes and settling into a calm meditation.

"She's doing what?" Shane asked confused.

"Shush!" Twilight warned, eagerly watching her teacher perform her eminent responsibilities. "She has to raise the sun."

Shane stared at her with a curious smirk. "*Raise the sun?*" he confirmed.

"You know...the big fireball in the sky?" Twilight reminded annoyed.

Shane twisted in the carriage toward Celestia, grinning in disbelief. "They think *YOU* raise the sun?!" He began chuckling. He turned back to see the appalled faces of the six young mares. "Holy shit! *They do.*" His laughter intensified. "You devious bitch. You actually have them convinced *YOU* raise the fucking sun! Hahaha! That's brilliant! *God*, you probably *wake up* laughing!"

Twilight was too horrified to do anything more than keep her jaw from hitting the ground. Celestia, on the other hoof, merely looked

back with a small smile, nodding ever so subtly at Luna.

The night princess caught Celestia's slight gesture immediately. With a flap of her splendid azure wings, she hopped off the royal chariot to join her sister.

They both sat in perfect meditation, horns and eyes aglow with cosmic magic, while the human continued to laugh his happy ass off in the background.

Almost before he realized what was happening, the courtyard was thrust into the daytime; golden sun shining down on Equestria in all of its brilliance. The laughter was notably absent as Shane gazed about perfectly baffled by the sudden radiance. Just as he seemed to get his bearings, Luna brought back the night, formerly golden valleys were now bathed in the silvery veil of twinkling night.

Shane stepped down from the carriage; past the alicorns who were bending the titans of the cosmos to their will. His jaw hung slack at what his eyes were telling his brain. The sun and moon switched places a few more times before settling to a slowly rising eastern sun.

His eyes were as wide as an infant witnessing the world for the first time. Celestia smiled at his amazement, relishing at his face as a lifetime's worth of irrefutable truths shattered in an instant.

He raked his fingers over his cropped mane, before lacing his fingers on the back of his neck, staring at the slowly rising sun for several minutes. "Done," he announced, throwing his hands up submissively. "I'm done." He eventually rubbed his eyes vigorously before reaching into a pocket and sticking another cigarette between his teeth. He set the slender stick ablaze with a flick of the silver lighter, before turning back and marching toward the carriage, shaking his head in denial.

"I fuckin' hate this place," he grouched as he passed the smug pair of alicorns.

~~~~~

The human was safely deposited back in his padded cell. He immediately set to happily checking his gear. He seemed somewhat pleased at being able to furnish the padded room with a few of his own possessions. Celestia somewhat dreaded the scene, it was only going to make convincing him to move to an actual guest room that much harder.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to excuse myself,” Celestia said. “I have a make up meeting with internal revenue in an hour.” She turned to her sister. “Do you have anything to do today?”

“Nothing terribly pressing, no.” Luna admitted.

“Would you mind watching him for the day? He probably needs to be fed again.”

Shane sat down next to Twilight, mumbling, “I wonder if they’ve considered fitting me for a leash yet.”

Twilight chuckled. “At least you’re house-broken.”

“Who said I was house broken?” he raised an eyebrow playfully as he removed the assault rifle from his back, leaning against his cot next to his shotgun.

Twilight rolled her eyes, but smiled.

Shane pulled some Velcro tabs on various sections of his armor shedding the vest and letting it fall to the floor with a heavy thud. He cracked his neck both ways causing Twilight to shudder and shoot him an irritated groan.

Apparently having decided on a game plan, Celestia spoke, “Major, I shall see you tonight. I’m leaving you in Luna’s care until then.”

“You’re leaving me with *her*?!” he whined in mock distress.

“Oh come now,” Luna sounded hurt, “...try to think all the good times we’ve shared.”

“That shouldn’t take long, I’ve still got the bruises,” he jabbed.

“Self inflicted, albeit indirectly. I shall schedule you an appointment with a psychiatrist,” she noted with a hint of tease in her voice.

Shane chuckled, “There isn’t enough therapy in the world, princess.”

“I am quite aware you are already psychologically damaged beyond repair. I merely hoped to salvage whats left and examine it for educational purposes,” Luna teased.

Celestia sighed. The two would probably be verbally sparring for hours if left to their own devices. Luna was the younger sibling, but she was still old enough to be considered ancient, older than almost any being in existence. Yet the lunar princess still had an immature streak a mile wide despite Celestia’s numerous attempts to correct it. This human wasn’t helping. He was perhaps the only other one she had ever met who could potentially rival Luna in snarkiness.

Shane pulled a medical box from the crate with the busted lock, and sat down on his cot. The six younger mares eyed him curiously but he didn’t seem to mind. He unbuttoned the outer blouse setting across his lap. He unwrapped his still bandaged arms, revealing several very unattended cuts.

“Why have those not been stitched yet?” Luna asked exceedingly annoyed. She was tired of this argument. “I sent a doctor down here yesterday morning. I though she was going to take care of you.”

“Yeah, she was here,” Shane confirmed casually. “Oddly enough she *suddenly* recalled a pressing engagement and had to go away forever,” he explained. “Very sad.”

“You chased her off somehow didn’t you?” Luna sighed.

“Me?! Pfft! Come on now... ...*maybe*”

“She was just trying to *help*,” Luna said from behind the hoof massaging her forehead.

“She did... She helped marvelously by going away.”

“You are *impossible*.” Luna complained.

*"I learned it from watching you,"* he almost seethed through a grin.

Celestia couldn't help but smile a little. "You can lead a human to medical care..." she murmured to Luna.

Princess Luna snorted softly, but cracked a small grin.

Fluttershy moved forward, more than willing to step in and offer her services once again. Shane stopped her with a finger, "Nah ah ah, You stay over there. We're still not friends." The human growled at the mare, with considerable bite.

Fluttershy hung her head and slunk away behind Applejack, still thoroughly depressed. The human's rejection stung Fluttershy more deeply than anypony probably knew. She only ever wanted to help, to make amends. Why wouldn't he let her? It was her special talent, *the thing that defined her*, and he hated her for it.

Celestia finally took her leave, already late as it was.

Apparently realizing this was about as exciting as it was going to get for the day, Rainbow Dash took off as well, mentioning an aching desire to get back into the clouds.

Applejack took Fluttershy away before the human could reduce her to tears. Soon only Pinkie, Twilight, and Rarity remained with Luna and the human.

Shane was busy setting out an array of strange tools and supplies. "Hold this," he handed Twilight a purple tube topped with gray plastic caps, apparently appointing her his assistant. He opened up a baggy filled with tiny silver staples. He rested his left arm across his knees and selected a staple, appraising a long tear near his wrist. He took a deep breath and pushed one end into the skin on the edge of a large gash. A pained groan escaped his lips before he muscled them shut. He pinched the incision closed before bridging the staple across and pushing the other end of the staple through the skin on the opposite side.

Rarity took the opportunity to turn green and excuse herself. Pinkie followed to make sure Rarity was alright.



Twilight watched with hesitant curiosity. His fingers were amazingly dexterous, manipulating the tiny pins with only slight trouble as he was limited to working with only one hand. She wasn't squeamish, but even her nostrils flared every now and then from the unsavory sights. For the most part she just tried to focus on assisting whenever he asked.

A few more staples went in. Beads of sweat began forming on his face and neck. Another staple went in, he swore under his breath when his fingers slipped and blood began to leak out of the incision, streaking across his hide like crimson tears.

By the time he finished the first cut, his hands were shaking slightly. At his direction, Twilight handed slender tube, not unlike toothpaste. He unscrewed the cap with his teeth. He lined several beads of clear oozing liquid across the now stapled gap in his flesh. The silver pieces of metal held the wound closed as the liquid sutures apparently dried.

It was an ingenious way to treat such a wound she had to admit, if not somewhat impractical.

Twilight levitated a silver pair of tweezers to the human, who blew softly on the wound before seizing the first staple in the row between the pincers of the tweezers, removing the metal piece from his skin. He took out a few more before dropping the tweezers and swearing at his finger's lack of cooperation.

Luna stepped up, confident she understood the procedure. She levitated the tweezers. 'Here,' she beckoned with a hoof. "Just let me do it. You're making a mess."

Shane eyed the alicorn dubiously, which she returned with a stern motherly glare. He reluctantly extended his arm to the alicorn, still looking a bit skittish about the idea.

Luna was as gentle as possible as she removed the tiny steel staples from around the dried liquid stitches. Shane still winced or swore under his breath every so often.

He looked away from Luna's work, apparently searching for

something to distract himself, his blue eyes settling on Twilight. "So...what's up?" he asked in a deceptively casual tone, despite his pained wincing.

Twilight chuckled at his faces, trying to think of something to take his mind off the pain. "Is it really as bad as you make it out to be? Earth?"

Shane snorted, amused by the question. "No," he admitted. "I wasn't lying...but I *may* have a tendency to over exaggerate to get my point across. If you can manage to get passed the existential nightmare that is *life on Earth*, you'll realize it's a pretty amazing place, filled with amazing things, and amazing people. It's true, Earth is full of scary shit, yet despite that, there is good. Which, *without getting too philosophical*, I think makes it all the more special. Humans are a fun bunch, if not a tad unpredictable. I think you'd like the most of them. I kinda wish you could. I'm not a good example of the average human. I feel rather bad knowing that I'm the only one you'll get to meet."

Twilight felt bad too, the more she learned of this one, the more curious she became.

"Switch," Luna commanded, as she finished up his left arm. The ability to magically manipulate several items at once sped the procedure considerably, and Luna was making short work of the human's wounds. Shane shifted on his cot allowing the alicorn access to his other arm.

The shiny golden oak leaves pined on the human's collar caught the purple unicorn's attention. It was a question she had been meaning to ask. "Forgive the ignorance..." she began, "but you seem awfully young to be a Major. Isn't that a pretty high rank?" Twilight knew it was. Having a brother in the military called for a rudimentary knowledge of such things. But it very well may have been different for humans.

Shane laughed. "Yeah it's fairly high up there, and ordinarily you'd be right. You'd be hard pressed to find someone my age with this rank." He flicked his collar with a free finger. "It's very long and interesting story. I might tell you someday," he grinned.

“How old are you exactly?” Luna asked still busy with her work, but genuinely curious. It was a question that had been in back of her mind for some time.

“Assuming I don’t have to convert it to like...pony-years? I’m twenty-six.”

“You’re not that much older than me,” Twilight nudged his shoulder playfully.

“Still so young?” Luna said in a whisper, finding the figure unusually difficult to digest.

“You can’t be all that much older. I thought horses only live to be about forty or so,” Shane retorted at the azure princess upon hearing her hushed remark.

Luna scoffed at the prospect. “I’m sure you’ll be happy to know that ponies live *much* longer than that. And I’m afraid I’m considerably older than *twenty-six*.”

“So, what? Forty? Fifty? Gimme a ballpark here.”

“Fourt...”

“Forty is pretty young.”

Luna cleared her throat awkwardly “...Fourteen hundred.”

Shane pulled his arm away from the princess and fixed her with an odd look. “...What?”

“I am one thousand four hundred and seventeen years old,” she said finally.

Shane regarded the alicorn for several minutes, eyes narrowing in and out as her inspected the princess. He looked over at the purple unicorn by his side.

Twilight nodded, affirming the figure.

Shane looked back to Luna who was beginning to blush slightly

under his critical gaze.

“Oh...wow” he finally whispered. “...well...uhm...you look *great*,” he nodded exaggeratedly, as if to console the ancient creature. He turned back to Twilight and grimaced, mouthing what looked like ‘yikes’ causing the unicorn to stifle a chuckle.

Luna rolled her eyes at the two. She was more than certain his mind was racking itself to formulate all the old-mare jokes and jabs he could possibly conceive.

. “So is that a normal thing for ponies or did you like sell your soul for immortality? Because, I’ll be the first to admit I ain’t exactly the best judge of this kinda thing but you don’t look *that* much older than her.” He nodded toward Twilight.

“Most ponies live to be about one hundred or so. Earth ponies always seem to last a bit longer,” she explained briefly. “Celestia and I are ...different. We are among the last of the true alicorns. Magic permeates every fiber of our being, and links us to the sun and the moon. Longevity is merely an interesting side effect. Barring any cataclysmic injury or illness, we shall endure.”

“For how long?”

“We shall see...”

“That’s...kinda depressing,” Shane decided.

Luna smiled. “It has its occasional advantages. How long do humans tend to live?” She asked hoping to get the topic off herself as she restarted her work.

“Depends,” he stared, “On average I’d say about a hundred thirty-ish. Hundred forty if you’re lucky. Hundred fifty if you’re lucky and *rich*. It’s another one of those things. I’m afraid any in-depth answer won’t make sense if you don’t know anything about bio-technology or our healthcare systems.”

Luna nodded sagely, returning to her work patching the rents in human tissue.

“Well I can’t wait to teach you all about Equestria,” Twilight beamed, thrilled at the opportunity to put all her lessons on friendship and magic to the test

“...*All of my joy*,” Shane panned, wincing as Luna jabbed him extra hard. She shot him a “be nice” glare, to which he rolled his eyes.

Twilight chatted with him idly about random things while Luna finished her work, Shane jerking or wincing every few minutes.

“Done,” Luna declared proudly, as she removed the last staple from his arm. “An innovative procedure. It seems a bit delicate for combat care though, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yeah, you’d never find this stuff in the field,” Shane agreed. “This is more high level care, stuff they do in *actual* hospitals. These are just nicer than stitches because they’ll dissolve after a few weeks. They even threw in some antiseptic strips. You’d never actually waste time painstakingly stitching someone up in the middle of combat. It’s pretty much, slap a tourniquet on, wrap his ass up like a mummy and pray he survives till a corpsman gets there.”

“That seems oddly primitive,” Twilight noted.

Shane shrugged, “Not every grunt can be a surgeon. If your buddy springs a leak that you can’t fix, plug it up and take him to someone who can. You’d be amazed at the shit they can fix at *actual* Naval hospitals, but in combat, primitive is usually all you got. So we make do.” Shane flexed his arms happily rid of the bulky cloth bandages. He grabbed the purple plastic tube from Twilight, gripping the center of the tube in his right hand, pulling one of the grey safety caps off with his left. The cap was concealing a small silver needle.

He pulled the primer cap off with his teeth, spitting it on the ground before unceremoniously jabbing the needle into his thigh. The needle punched easily through the tough fabric of his utilities and into the meat of his leg. Twilight jumped slightly with surprise. The tube was emitting some sort of mechanical whirring sound as a tiny motor pumped the tube’s contents into the human’s leg.

“What is that?”

“Antibiotic,” he said grimacing slightly, “and a painkiller, all in one convenient, easy to use, auto-injector,” he quoted with a slight accented smile, sounding like he was quoting an advertisement. He removed the injector from his thigh, massaging the site, gingerly, before replacing the safety cap over the needle and tossing the spent auto-injector on his cot.

A royal purple coiffure poked into the doorframe. Rarity’s sapphire blue eyes quickly inspected the room, ensuring there would be no more stomach turning medical procedures.

Pinkie nudged Rarity inside, eager to get back amongst the others. Bouncing into the room, she seized her usual uncomfortably close seat on the cot next to Shane.

He amusedly reached over and scratched the pink mare behind her ear. “Mommy never taught us about personal space, did she?”

Pinkie Pie hummed contentedly rolling her head around his dancing fingers, “Mmmm...*Nope!*” she finally answered.

“Pinkie, dear, you *really* must show more restraint, especially in front of the Major. Whatever will he tell of us when he returns home? I simply won’t have all of humanity thinking ponies are so undignified.”

Pinkie stuck her tongue out very maturely at the unicorn’s scolding.

Rarity’s words struck a chord in Luna’s heart. She still hadn’t exactly told Shane that he was likely going to be stuck here forever. She wasn’t sure why she hadn’t told him yet. Maybe she was worried about how he’d react. He probably knew. He was certainly pessimistic enough about the idea. But Luna couldn’t help but think that somewhere under his abrasive demeanor was nothing more than a lonely man clinging to the shred of hope that he might one day see his home.

She looked up from her slightly grim thoughts, to find the human watching her from the corner of his eye. She hoped desperately he

hadn't gleaned anything from her reaction to Rarity's quip.

Shane leaned back against the wall, releasing Luna from his gaze with the ghost of a smile on his lips. Luna relaxed a bit. She made a mental note not to be more cautious with her guard when the human was near. He would likely seize any opportunity to get inside her head, if he wasn't already.

"So I have a question I've been meaning to ask," he finally spoke to the three young mares. "I get *her*," he pointed at Luna, "but why did they drag the six of you into this mess?"

"I suppose it would seem strange from your perspective," Luna explained, "but do not let their appearances fool you, Major. Those girls' power combined is host to one of the most powerful and ancient of magics known to pony kind."

"...If you say Captain Planet I'm leaving," he stated, confusing the shit out of everyone.

"What?"

"No? ... Nevermind then. Continue," he dismissed with a swish of his hand.

Luna shook her head deciding the issue wasn't worth pursuing. "The Elements of Harmony," she explained with gravity. "Each of those six mares represents her own element. The power of the Harmony elements is unparalleled. They stand as Equestria's last line of defense, and have more than once saved Equestria from disaster."

"The fuck is an *element of harmony*?"

"Every one of those mares is the physical embodiment of one of the Elemental aspect of magic itself. *Harmony*. They, and only they, are intimately linked to the most potent and powerful energy in Equestria."

"How powerful?" he asked still looking at them like they were about to laugh and tell him they were pulling his leg.

“...very,” Luna elaborated.

“So let me see if I’m understanding this... each of you is an element of harmony?” Shane looked to the three girls, who nodded enthusiastically. Shane pointed to Rarity expectantly before the snow white unicorn caught on.

“Generosity,” Rarity answered his unspoken question, beaming proudly.

“Magic,” Twilight answered as the human’s finger shifted over to her.

Shane looked over at Pinkie Pie. “No, let me guess,” he started eyeing Pinkie head to hoof, “*Cocaine*,” he guessed.

Pinkie snorted out a laugh. “No silly! *Laughter*.”

Shane looked around dubiously, obviously trying to puzzle out whether or not the mares were messing with him. “Well...I guess it’s not the weirdest thing I’ve heard today,” he concluded tiredly.

“I suppose it isn’t,” Luna agreed with a smile. “So what shall we do today, Major? Despite my sister, I have no intention of keeping you hidden away when my there is so much Canterlot has to offer a foreigner. The Archives, The crown jewels, the gardens, Tia’s golden apple tree. What would you like to see?”

Shane scratched his chin contemplatively, feeling the stiff bristles that had been growing steadily since his arrival. “A shower sounds pretty nice.”

Luna smiled at the simple request. “Easy enough.” Luna thought for a moment. “You can use the amenities in my quarters. I don’t think it would be wise to let you walk into the barracks facilities, and the royal apartments are probably rife with wandering eyes at this hour.”

Shane nodded, seemingly satisfied with the plan.

“Well girls, if I were you I would find the others, the kitchens should still be serving breakfast. They can cook you whatever you



like while I give the human a bath.”

Shane snorted at the phrasing. Twilight gave him a reassuring smile. Luna moved to inform her guards of the plan. She requested two to escort them, the rest were to maintain their posts. Large troop movements tended to draw attention, and moving in the light of day was risky enough.

Happy with the admittedly short term game plan, Shane collected a few articles of clothing; a clean set of desert cammies along with some brown socks and a set of olive green skivvies. He meticulously folded them into a bundle and tucked it under his arm and grabbing a small brown tan bag from his bottomless green duffle.

Rarity cast an almost disapproving glance over his possessions. “They really should consider something that *isn’t* tan or green,” she commented idly.

“I’ll be sure to bring that up at our next meeting,” Shane smiled.

“Don’t get me wrong darling it’s a striking uniform I just don’t think it would *kill* them to have a little variety in their wardrobe. Maybe something in a blue or even a yellow.”

He laughed.

“Or perhaps not,” she deflated somewhat. “Regardless, you must get bored of wearing the same thing every day.”

“Not really,” he shrugged. “All my cammies broken in and comfortable. I own civilian clothes too, I promise. They’re just at my house. Or they *should* be. I haven’t been home in... awhile,” he recalled somewhat wistfully.

“But you’ve only been here for a little over a week,” Twilight noted.

“I mean like *home* home. As in, my personal place of residence.”

“So where were you before you came here?” Twilight prodded as they walked.

“Would the name of place in a totally alternate dimension really

mean anything to you?"

"I suppose not," Twilight relented. "But there's something to be said about the benefits of the simple act of sharing."

The doors to the courtyard open from the arcane influences of the two unicorn guards posted on either side. Shane pulled on his strange eight point hat, pulling the bill down low, obscuring his eyes in shadow. He sighed, "*Nevada*. We left from a place called Nevada. Before that we were in Ohio, before *that* we were in Colorado. It's been almost...two years since I was *home* home."

Twilight jolted slightly at the names. It was most likely just wild coincidence that the humans had similarly named locations. She decided not to pursue the subject, but made sure to keep a mental note for later consideration.

Luna could see ponies in the distance. So far it seemed that none had really noticed them. Luna saw Shane eyeing them. Even from under the brim of his cover, she could see apprehension cross his face. Perhaps more concerning was the way his fingers were drumming on the grip of his holstered sidearm.

"Relax, Major." Luna soothed, "There is no cause for alarm. You are not the strangest thing to have walked the halls of this castle. However if you keep acting like an alien conspiracy I am quite certain everypony will react accordingly. Remain calm and act like you belong here and everypony will assume the situation is well in hoof."

"Is it?"

"For the moment," she assured. "Which is all the more reason I need you to follow my lead. You have 'covered your bases'. Let me cover mine. Your arrival marks a monumental era in our history. If not handled carefully... It will go very wrong indeed."

"...This is going to get messy...isn't it?" he said rather quietly.

Luna looked back at him, an almost apologetic look in her eyes. "Yes."

Shane looked down at the purple unicorn mare by his side, as if to ensure she was still there.

She offered a reassuring smile, but he just frowned and continued to let his eyes wander about the grounds.

“Don’t worry, Shaney! Everypony is gonna be super happy you’re here. And we’re gonna throw a BIG party to celebrate and everypony will be invited and there’ll be cake and dancing and songs and ice cream...” an evil grin came across the pink filly’s lips, “...and *peppermints*,”

“So there won’t be any candy?”.

Twilight’s ears folded in preparation of the impending debate.

~~~~~

Twilight, Pinkie and Rarity bid their farewells once they reached the castle walls leaving Shane alone with Luna, a prospect he seemed less than thrilled about when Twilight voiced their departure.

His demeanor rapidly changed when Luna made a tempting promise of half a bottle of cherry wine she kept in her cabinet. It could be his if he behaved.

Twilight shook her head, amused by the strange character. The girls all chatted as they made their way to the kitchens, but Twilight’s mind was firmly on her bed. From the looks of it, the others were tired as well. They were up all night after all. Even Pinkie was showing signs of fatigue. Rainbow Dash was probably well passed unconscious on a cloud above Canterlot somewhere. Applejack and Fluttershy were sure to be around if not already in their rooms.

As soon as her stomach was full, Twilight planned on taking a nice long nap. Her brain needed time to properly process the past twenty four hours. Rarity agreed wholeheartedly. Staying up all night was a nightmare for her complexion. She could practically *feel* bags growing under her perfect blue eyes.

~~~~~

"I like your room." Shane commented randomly as his eyes wandered Luna's bedchamber.

Luna had to almost do a double take of the human at the remark. It was the kind of casual compliment that she had come to associate with everything that he was not. "...Thank you. I am rather fond of it as well," Luna said after a moment, "My sister seems to think it gets cluttered but I cannot help myself. These baubles and trinkets hold many memories for us."

Shane nodded absent mindedly. He unclasped the buckles strapping the holster to his thigh. He peeled off a strap of Velcro that wrapped around his belt, removing the holster and sidearm entirely. He set the bundle housing the heavy forty-five on Luna's desk before turning to the starry alicorn. "Alright, I behaved. You owe me a drink."

Luna frowned, "I normally wouldn't give a reward for merely maintaining the absolute bare minimum of social conduct. But I suppose I *did* promise." Luna opened a drawer in her desk forking over a slender bottle of cherry wine she kept for the occasional nightcap.

Shane smiled, pulling the cork with his teeth. He saluted Luna with the bottle and took a hefty swig before scrunching up his face. "Jesus, that's sweet." He took another swig regardless, licking his teeth like a satisfied wolf. He offered Luna the bottle.

Luna regarded him and the proffered bottle with a slightly dubious smirk. Shane shook the sleek glass bottle temptingly with a questioning lift of an eyebrow. *Oh why not?* Luna thought throwing her better judgment to the wind for the moment.

She levitated the bottle from his offering hand, however pausing to also telekinetically pull a tall crystal glass from the same drawer in her desk. She proceeded to fill the glass with the bright, almost pink, cherry wine. "We can at least *pretend* we're not complete savages, Major."

Shane sighed, "If the shoe fits..."

Now it was Luna's turn to smile. "Finally admitting it then?"

"Never denied it. We can't *all* be perfect little pony princesses now can we?"

"No I suppose we can't," Luna beamed as she sipped her drink. "Perfection is so rarely found these days."

"Hmm," Shane grimaced, "I need to go wash all this royal egotism off before it infects me."

"I have a feeling you were lost to narcissism long before we ever met, Major."

"A moot accusation," he noted. "Regardless I still strangely feel the need to clean myself... Also shave before some salty ass Sergeant Major pops out of a bush and tells me to un-fuck myself." Shane picked up the brown ditty bag, full of various hygiene instruments.

Luna smiled, despite not quite understanding the remark. "Through there," Luna pointed a hoof though an open marble archway. "Do you need anything?"

Shane pulled the pistol from the holster on Luna's desk. "I need *this*." He waved the black steel piece a bit. "And this..." he snagged the bottle of wine out of Luna's magic, before turning on the spot and heading for the washroom.

"Shower booze," He explained in advance. She didn't even bothering to ask why he needed the gun. He shut the dark oak doors behind him; Luna heard the brass lock click into place.

She rolled her eyes at the sheer strangeness of her situation. In the past two weeks her world had been turned on its head. From Empyrean stream theory, to extra-universal transit, to inter-dimensional creatures themselves, it had been a busy week. Although Luna had to admit even she was expecting aliens to be a bit more like the campfire stories of little green ponies with huge black eyes that built crop circles in their flying saucers, full of some ancient galactic wisdom.

But a little green pony, Shane was not. *Sociopathic frat boy*, was a

more appropriate description in Luna's opinion. She heard the water turn on. Luna settled down on her dais with a stack of legal documents that needed her signature.

A gentle rapping came from the other side of Luna's chamber door. At the princess' word, a Night Sentinel nudged it open favoring Luna with an eager bow.

"Yes?" Luna spoke, after nodding the stallion to return to his hooves.

"Forgive the intrusion, your majesty, but will you be dining in your chambers this morning?"

Luna was rather hungry. She also supposed the human probably needed to eat soon. The last thing she needed was a hungry carnivore loose in the castle. She gave the guard her orders, to be brought back to her room.

The Sentinel cleared his throat rather awkwardly. "And what of your...*guest*, highness?"

"Hold on," Luna trotted over to the door, unlocking the brass mechanism with a flash of magic, before striding into the washroom purposefully.

The guard stood for a moment in silence before overhearing the princess speak.

"Major?"

"WHAT THE FUCK?! GET OUT!"

The guard winced at the ruckus coming from the bathroom, it sounded like someone took a rather nasty fall, followed by breaking glass, the human shouting obscenities the whole time.

Luna ducked back out the doorway before turning back around. "Oh *Calm down!* You are overreacting! It's not like I haven't already-EEP" Luna yelped and ducked just in time as a large boot whizzed over her head. "I just wanted to know what you wanted for-" Luna shrieked and slammed the door shut just as something

collided into the other side with considerable force.

Luna blew an errant strand of starry hair out of her face. She turned back to the guard, smiling somewhat embarrassedly. “He’ll just have what I’m having.”

The guard bowed, eager to be free of the awkward situation, and departed.

Luna sighed, turning back to the washroom door. “Was that *really* necessary, Major? I just wanted to ask you something.” She spoke through the door, annoyance heavy in her speech.

“I don’t have any clothes on!” he shouted back.

“I don’t see what the big deal is. I’m not wearing clothes either.”

“THAT DOESN’T MAKE IT BETTER!!! If *anything* that makes it worse!”

“Well *excuse me* for not knowing humans were so self-effacing.”

“Then consider yourself educated, because next time I’m just going to shoot you.”

“I don’t think you will. You *need* me.” She challenged teasingly.

“Keep pushin’ it then. We’ll find out together.”

Luna chuckled at the flustered human, wandering at the creature’s obsession with constant clothing. It might make sense for a race with no fur coat to develop a nudity taboo. She settled back down to her paperwork contemplating the information.

Luna worked diligently through her stack of paper work and legal documents. A noticeable span of time past while Luna worked, her ears occasionally overhearing the sounds of human hygiene rituals. She signed yet another form with the phoenix quill Celestia gave her. Carefully allowing the nub scratching softly against the parchment.

Another knock at the door made it clear to the lunar princess that

she was, in fact, not going to get any work done today. “Come in,” Luna spoke, attempting to keep the annoyance from her voice.

Aegis poked his nose inside the door tentatively scanning the room but finding only the princess sitting at her desk expectantly. He pushed into the room, pausing to lower his head in a reverential bow.

“What is it, Commander?” Luna questioned.

Aegis looked uneasy. “I’m not sure, Highness. Possibly nothing.”

Luna cocked an eyebrow at the armor clad stallion.

“A missive arrived this morning,” the stallion began to explain, “... from the Griffon Prime Minister...”

‘*Strange.*’ Luna perked up, suddenly very interested. She was on friendly terms with the griffon, but he was hardly the type to play pen-pal. “What did Celestia say? The court is hers while the sun continues to shine. Why do you bring this to me?”

Aegis scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “Well, highness... It’s addressed to you...*specifically.*”

Now Luna was thoroughly puzzled. She beckoned with a hoof. The Guard Commander stuck his muzzle into the saddlebag resting neatly over his armored flank. He pulled out a sharply marked envelope, complete with Magneus’ personal crest stamped onto the wax seal. Luna turned it over on a telekinetic bed of starry magic.

The brass knob of the bathroom door broke Luna’s attention. As the human walked out now dressed in a new set of desert digital pants and form fitting green skivvy shirt. His slight limp made Luna realize he was still missing the boot he threw at her after their... exchange.

He was busy thoughtfully contemplating the bottle of Luna’s shampoo, while scratching his head with the barrel of his pistol.

“*Un nom à consonance française,*” he read the label aloud.

*“Moisturizing formula with crushed crystal berries and sweet almond oil is sure to bring out the luster in even the most ethereal and astral*



manes.” He snorted amusedly but kept reading, “*Guaranteed to rope in the stallion of your dreams.*” He looked up and around the room expectantly. “Well? ...Where’s my stallion” His eyes fell on Aegis. “It better not be *him*,” he frowned.

Luna chuckled at the thought. “It’s just an marketing gimmick, Major. You don’t actually get a stallion.”

“Pffttt,” he tapped the shampoo bottle with the pistol. “Your soap made promises of a romantical nature and I expect you to live up to them.” he asserted adamantly.

“We won’t though. Plastic bottles do not a binding contract make, Major.” Luna chuckled.

He was only playing. His poorly concealed smile made that clear, but Aegis still felt compelled to lean into Luna and quietly question, “What’s gotten into him?”

Shane set the now empty wine bottle on Luna’s desk with a soft clink.

“Ah,” Aegis concluded to himself.

Shane strolled over to where his boot lay, pulling it over his brown socked foot. He tied and tucked the laces before neatly blousing his trousers at the boot.

Luna and Aegis both watched with admitted fascination as his fingers worked the slender laces into complex positions without any magic at all.

Shane stood back up and noticed the two staring. He furrowed his brow, apparently confused by the attention, but shrugged it off before snagging his holster off Luna’s desk. He secured the top strap to his belt, and the other two around his upper thigh. He stuck the pistol in its tan housing with an unnecessary little twirl.

He pulled out the pack of cigarettes from his cargo pocket, grabbing a slender stick between his lips.

Luna stirred out of her observational trance. “Nah ah ah,” she

scolded, telekinetically removing the stick from his mouth before he could fish out his lighter. “Not in my castle! If you *insist* on spewing noxious fumes, you will do so *outside*.”

Shane rolled his eyes, snagging his cigarette from Luna’s magic and walking to the ornate glass doors leading to the princess’ balcony. He popped the brass latch, and strode out onto the sunlit marble mezzanine, pushing the door closed behind him. He seated himself on the edge of the golden banister and bringing the silver lighter to his lips. He lowered it, exhaling a cloud of hazy gray smoke, and staring out into the expanse of Equestria.

Luna and Aegis watched him through the massive glass doors for a few seconds, before Aegis finally spoke. “*He’s doing what?*” he asked confused by the princess’ remark.

“Some masochistic human ritual,” she sighed. She shook her head to get her thoughts back on track. She stared down at the missive on her desk, the bright red wax seal still staring back at her expectantly.

*Well, gawking at it won’t make it go away.* She thought to herself, tearing into the envelope. She pulled the letter out and set her shining sapphire eyes to scanning the elegant scrollwork of the Prime Minister’s script.

*Her Majesty Princess Luna,*

*I do hope I’m not overstepping my bounds by contacting you directly, but I simply could not restrain myself. There have been trappings of rumors floating about parliament of some sort of meteorite landing somewhere in Equestria. It very well may be just the gossip of idling politicians, but I’ve always had a small affinity for astronomy, and so few actually make it through the atmosphere... I apologize for wasting your time with my hobbies. But if it is in fact true could you find it in your heart to send a copy of your notes on the rock to your dear old friend?*

*As always give your sister my best,*

*~Magneus*

Aegis sat dutifully awaiting the princess' explanation.

Luna set the letter down on her desk, finished reading a perfectly indecipherable expression on her face.

"Well?" Aegis prodded expectantly. "What does it say?"

Luna should have seen this coming. She had known Magneus kept an eye on the skies. *Of course* someone else could have seen the ship, it was a giant fireball tearing through the upper atmosphere. But in all honesty she wasn't as worried about her own subjects, most of whom just seemed to assume the princesses had the cosmic venue under control. The 'meteor' received relatively little attention in the Equestrian media. So she dismissed the issue. She had failed to consider eyes from beyond her borders.

It seemed word of the event finally spread across the sea. Luckily for her it seemed the attention was nothing more than an idle curiosity. She silently wondered if he had even bothered to bring it to the attention of the queen herself. She had no reason to suspect he knew the true scope of the situation.

Yet she hadn't the slightest idea of how to proceed. She knew Celestia was planning on revealing the human's existence at some point. That *was* technically the next logical move.

A sudden thought struck the lunar princess. Luna set the letter aside. She could spare a few days to respond. It was just an idea, but she should probably run it by her sister first.

Luna realized she never answered the patiently waiting stallion. She brought the old war horse up to speed.

He ruminated on the incident for a few seconds. "I met him once," he started. "If it is any comfort to you, highness, I think your secret is still safe. Griffon politics can be a bit underhanded but even he doesn't strike me as the type to play something so roundabout. If he knew, he'd have asked already."

Luna agreed, but couldn't afford not to assess the situation from all angles. She looked out onto the veranda. The human's cigarette was

gone. He was just sitting there, perched on the marble banister with one leg cocked up to his chest and the other dangling out over empty space.

She considered going out and telling him to get down before he fell, but knowing his seemingly never ending love for irritating her, he'd probably jump off out of spite.

She noticed him fussing with something. It was quite small but he held it reverently. A small black square. He held it up against the sunlight, twisting and turning with studied curiosity. He brought it back down, tucking in his pocket and looking around. His eyes caught Luna staring and froze.

Luna blinked... he blinked back. This went on for several seconds. He eventually just frowned and turned back to his view, sticking another cigarette in his mouth, leaving Luna to her conjecture. His constant air of furtive up-to-something-ness was growing more and more worrisome. She could never tell if his behavior was genuinely suspicious or if it was all misinterpreted cultural differences. It irritated her.

"We aren't going to worry about this now" Luna said to the waiting stallion. "I have a few ideas. But I shan't be doing anything without first running it by Celestia."

Aegis nodded and bowed. "Of course, highness. If you'll excuse me, I believe your breakfast is waiting. I have a few things to take care of. I'll come check on you in a few hours." The older stallion excused himself with another bow. Sure to his word, he opened the door to find two carts laden with breakfast foods. The servant was gone, the staff tended to know better than to disturb the princess when she was meeting with somepony. She never actually got around to figuring out how, but they always seemed to know when she busy with something.

She smiled and pulled the two carts in herself, parking them by a few cushions by her obsidian fireplace. She flicked the brass latch on the doors leading to the veranda.

Shane didn't turn to look back at her. Instead he stared out over the

sprawling green hills of Equestria as it basked in the morning sun. Idle pockets of rolling storm clouds cast powerful columns of shadow. Luna had not looked upon the weather schedule in a few days. It had been almost a week since their last good rain. They must be overdue. The tall spires of darkness were still far off. They contrasted the brilliant blue skies with hauntingly beautiful efficiency.

The two were quiet. Luna was perfectly content to keep the silence. It was nice to have a moment just to sit and simply *be*. Luna stretched her glorious wings, her indigo feathers drinking in the warmth of Celestia's sunrays. Contrary to popular belief, Luna held no aversion to sunlight. It was true, she preferred the cool embrace of her velvet night, but the sun was not without its charms. She even enjoyed it...in small doses. And there was no denying that the view was spectacular. The far-flung storm casting shadows across the shimmering greenery, the rays of sunlight trying to pierce the inky black clouds. It was stunning display of nature, beautiful and terrifying. Like a super-model with a chainsaw.

The human seemed oddly contemplative of the distant thunderheads. Luna came to the golden banister by his side, admiring the view as well. Shane put the cigarette between his lips. A long drag cut the smoldering end to the filter, and Shane flicked it away. He closed his eyes and blew the ashen poison from his lungs toward the sky, where it was whisked away up into the crisp Equestrian atmosphere.

"It's pretty," Shane said, almost startling the lunar princess. His, now open, eyes glossing over the view.

"It is," she agreed quietly.

"I'd say it looks like home," he started wistfully. "But all the little things give it away."

"Oh?"

He nodded. "You really only notice the differences when you really pay attention," he clarified as if Luna could understand the distinction of which he spoke.

“Like what?” she prodded.

“I gotta admit the whole sun and moon show was bit much,” he said scratching the back of his head.

Luna chuckled. It was more of a chirping amused noise rather than an actual laugh but she continued all the same. “Perhaps it was. But we were trying to make a point. I take it nopony raises the sun back on Earth?”

“...no,” he panned. “I’d tell you it’s impossible but I’m getting kinda sick of pointing offences to the laws of physics when you guys clearly don’t give a shit about them.”

“Forgive me if I am wrong but it sounds like you’re building to something.”

“Is it just you and her? Or are there more?”

“What do you mean?” Luna asked, confused.

Shane was quiet for a minute, ignoring Luna’s query. “This morning I saw you moving the sun around like it was on a string.” He was almost whispering.

“Celestia was moving the sun. I was moving the moon,” Luna corrected.

Shane scoffed. “Oh! Well that makes MUCH more sense. I don’t even know why I was confused in the first place. *OF COURSE* you were moving the moon!” If Luna had a container, she would have tried to see if she could capture the pure undiluted sarcasm leaking out of every orifice on the human’s body.

“Point made, Major.

“Can I ask you something?” he finally spoke.

“Of course,” she assured.

“What are you?” he asked seeming genuinely curious.

"I am many things," Luna said, unintentionally mirroring their past conversation. "Narrow your search and it may yield more fruitful results."

"I don't even know how to ask it," he admitted. If he had normal ears, Luna was sure they would be laid flat. Still watching the rolling clouds, he let a resigned sigh. "I've seen a lot of weird shit since I got here. I let a great deal of it slide because there are clearly different rules here. But that? ...a lesser man might even venture to say such feats were, dare I say, *Godlike*?" he asked, straight out of left field.

It was an amusing question if not posed somewhat unexpectedly. Although it would be a lie if she were to say he was the first to have asked it. Luna smiled. "Ah...It's *that* question." Shane nodded. "If told you yes, would you start being a little nicer?"

"No," he said perfectly serious.

Luna's grin widened. "What difference would it make then?"

"Humor me." The human finally turned to look at the princess directly.

Dancing around the question got her nowhere in the end, so she chose her words with great care. Religion was a walk of razors. "Short answer; 'Yes' with an *"If"*. Long answer; 'No' with a 'but'. I am what I am. Nothing more or less," she started cryptically. "I am the harbinger of the night, keeper of the moon and stars, and patron of darkness. I am a goddess, yes. But I think not in the sense you are implying.

I am an integral part of this world and have done my share to shape it...But I did not *create* it. This plane was here well before I was born, and shall continue well after I am gone. The Old Gods are long from this earth. They return only fleetingly to wander like shadowed memories in a forgotten dream."

Shane listened attentively, but kept his gaze focused on the horizon. It was a difficult thing to communicate to a mortal, especially one not of this world.

He nodded as if he understood. She couldn't know if he actually grasped what she was trying to say or if he was just nodding for lack of a better response. But he didn't inquire further.

"What of you, Major?" she prodded, hoping to coax the human from his brooding. "Such questions betray a familiarity of such things. Have thou any inclination to the divine in your world."

Shane shrugged, "Some do," he said vaguely. "Afraid it's another one of those things where every human you ask is going to have a slightly different opinion."

"What about yours?" she clarified.

"I doubt *God* would have any interest in me," he smiled almost painfully. "In my humble opinion... if there ever even was a God... He left us a long time ago." Shane looked back at the palace tower and frowned. "He sure as fuck ain't sitting in a castle in Washington. If that's what you're asking."

The silence returned. Luna didn't know enough about human culture to comment, so she stayed silent lest she make a fool of herself, or worse, offend him. She felt like she was on thin ice as it was. Luna could see the conflict in the human's eyes. The subtle traces of turmoil in his voice told her that it was a sensitive issue. So the silence continued.

Shane rolled his broad shoulders and stretched, cracking the bones in several key joints. "Storms coming," he noted in a quiet mumble.

Luna looked out at the looming thunderheads smirking. "What clued you in?"

He tapped his waist with a fist. "Hip," he said with a straight face, seemingly un-offended by Luna's jibe.

Luna didn't ask what he meant. She stood and nudged his shoulder with her muzzle. "Come. Eat with me, Major. I had breakfast delivered."

The human got up without question. The promise of food apparently enough to spur him from his thoughts and follow the



alicorn inside.

~~~~~

Shane picked at his food, clearly wishing for some form of meat. He was pleased to find scrambled eggs under one of the silver trays.

“Thought you guys were like vegan or something,” he accused smiling happily. He speared a fluffy yellow morsel with a fork and seizing it with his carnivorous front teeth.

“Hardly,” Luna clarified, amused. She nibbled at a piece of toast. “Pony’s digestive systems were simply not made to handle meat. Seafood is not uncommon fair for cities along the coast.” she noted, “The fact merely is there are not very many civilized carnivorous species native to Equestria. So a bit of a social stigma took root. When most ponies hear ‘carnivore’ they will naturally think of the wild hydra or fearsome manticores, rather than a civilized species. Experience has taught them so.”

“Makes sense,” he said idly, cleaning his third plate. Luna was almost impressed with the amount of food he could put away. She wasn’t complaining though. If anything she encouraged it. She had no desire to see what havoc a hungry carnivore could wreak on her court.

Luna had finished as well, she levitated the tea set over to low oak table they were sitting at and poured herself a cup. She filled the cup nearest the human as well.

Shane stared at the swirling dark liquid in the delicate teacup in front of him. He watched the cup for an inordinate amount of time as if not sure what to do with it.

Luna couldn’t imagine what where the lapse in understanding was stemming. “Do you not like tea, Major?”

He shrugged. “I like coffee,” he offered.

Luna smirked. “Cadence drinks coffee too,” she mused.

“Who?”

“Princess Cadence,” Luna clarified. “I’m sure you’ll have a chance to meet her soon enough.”

“Jesus...*Another* princess? Do you guys just slap the ‘*princess*’ label on any chick that walks in the door?” he asked rubbing his head.

“We most certainly do not,” Luna rejected somewhat offended.

“I’m never gonna remember all these princesses,” he murmured poking his still full teacup with a finger.

“Yes I can see how three whole names might be a bit much for you...” Luna noted.

“Yeah but they’re like...improper nouns and adjectives and shit. That’s not how names work,” he complained, still contemplating his teacup. He lifted the cup to his nose sniffing curiously.

“Try it,” Luna encouraged, sipping at her own cup.

He shrugged idly before tossing the teacup back like a university student with a shot glass. His face immediately soured, nostrils flared, his unhappiness apparent.

Luna had to forcibly restrain her laughter at the scene.

To his credit he did try to hide his revulsion at the beverage as quickly as he could.

“You don’t have to drink it,” Luna reminded.

He set the cup down as quickly as he could without shattering the delicate porcelain.

Luna chuckled amusedly. *It isn’t for everyone I suppose.*

The day carried on somewhat uneventfully, all things considered. Shane wandered around Luna’s room investigating the mysterious belongings of a dark alicorn princess. Luna sat and watched him explore while she worked at her desk. She equated the sight to a puppy in a new home, eagerly prodding about, curious of every nook and cranny.

He settled down on a plush dais, inspecting Luna's crystal chess set, the scene of his past defeat at her regal hooves. He started setting the pieces back in their proper starting places.

"Keen on a rematch so soon?" Luna quipped from her desk.

"...I don't think so," he smiled.

"Hmm pity. We can never seem to get ponies to agree to a second game."

He muttered something under his breath that Luna was quite certain it was better she not hear.

"If it's any comfort to you, know you did better than most tend to their first time," she offered.

He grinned deviantly. "What makes you think it was my first time?"

"First time playing *me*," she clarified ignoring the blatant innuendo.

"I'm a bit out of practice," he excused. "I haven't played chess in years."

"You played often?"

"Used to, till I got kicked off the chess team."

Luna seized the little fact immediately, grinning at the implications. "*You* were on a *chess team*?"

"It's *that* tough to believe, huh?" he smiled, voice colored with mock offence.

"Yes, actually," she chuckled softly. "Why and how did you manage to get kicked off of a chess team?"

"Starting fights," he recalled, whimsically knocking a king on its side.

Luna finally allowed herself to laugh out loud. The thought a little too painfully obvious for her to have not considered. Shane smiled

good naturedly, allowing the alicorn to have her moment of mirth.

~~~~~

After several hours sitting on her throne, it felt good to finally stretch her long slender legs. Had she more time she may have even taken a small fly around the castle. Alas, *time* was not a luxury she enjoyed much of these days.

The door to Luna's chamber came quickly. The two night sentinels snapped to as she approached. Celestia walked in the door tiredly. Stopping in her tracks as she noticed Shane sitting cross-legged on Luna's bed with a puzzle of black steel pieces laid out in neat display. It took the princess a moment to realize they were the pieces of his handgun. He wiped a small piece with a spotty white rag before setting it down and selecting another. She dismissed the initial thought that the weapon was broken, realizing he was merely cleaning it.

His face actually brightened when he saw Celestia. He even greeted Celestia with a familiar little wave.

Luna was gathering the scattered pieces of her crystal chess set from where they lay strewn about the room. Despite the chore, Luna held a victorious smirk. It didn't take a genius to riddle out what happened. Luna finally turned and noticed the new arrival. "Ah! Hello, sister. You're back early. Have your courts convened already?"

"I'm afraid not," Celestia sighed. "I merely ordered a short recess for a midday meal. I was going to check up and make sure you two hadn't caused too much trouble. I hope nothing catastrophic has occurred?"

"Luna tried to rape me in the shower," Shane noted casually.

"WHAT?!" Luna bellowed in disbelief. "I did NO such thing!"

Celestia's wings sagged. She was probably a fool for thinking that time spent with her sister and the human would be some sort of respite from the monotony of politics.

# ARTICLE 2 Part XIII

## ARTICLE 2

### Part XIII

By: Muppetz

Aegis paced outside the facility, his armor left back in the office. To the eyes of the city he was just another moving pony, idling about his business. He felt horribly exposed without his metal cocoon. His uniform white coat now back to its original dusty brown. The electric blue mane now back to his soft grey. He wasn't sure if he felt better or worse for the loss of his armor. Seeing his natural colors helped lend some perspective. He was still a pony under the metal plates. But the other hoof, the uniform was his entire life. He couldn't help but feel like half himself without it.

A cream colored unicorn sporting an orange safety vest came abreast of the Commander. Seeing his colleges and brethren without their uniforms was an unusual experience. Although necessary, it was rather awkward. "We're ready to move, sir," The cream colored unicorn murmured.

"Load em' up. Let's get this done," he ordered, sending the unicorn off to bark the orders at the rest of the un-armored guards.

To the casual observer, they were nothing more than an average team of moving ponies, hired to ship heavy cargo for well-to-do clients. The true nature of the chore was much more gruesome.

Ten large rectangular unmarked wooden boxes floated from the open doors of the facility. Under the shimmering magical influence of several unicorn guards, they were gently placed in the moving wagons.

He probably could have delegated this to one of his officers, but he so rarely got to go into the field with his men he was rather

insistent on personally attending the matter. Was it imperative he head the movement himself? Probably not. But he had been in command for nearly twenty years. He could get himself an interesting detail every now and then. It beat the paperwork that awaited him in his office.

A forest green earth pony climbed into one of the wagons, casting a cautious glance at the commander. Aegis nodded, and the stallion nodded in return, pounding the side of the wooden vehicle twice. The wagon lurched forward as the pegasi buffeted the air with powerful strokes.

Soon the entire train of moving company wagons was off. They knew their destination. Deep within the bowels of the ancient castle, *The Crematorium*.

Aegis sighed, and began the long walk back. He refused to get in the wagon with those things. He wasn't above admitting they spooked him just a bit.

The plodding sound of hoof falls on cobblestone filled his ears, as he joined the traffic of ponies going about their day, none of whom would ever really know what they had all just witnessed. He sighed again, trying to clear his head.

A fat raindrop landed squarely on the stallion's nose, followed by another, and another. Soon the skies broke open, drenching the air with sheets of summer rain.

"*At least the weather is nice,*" he smiled to himself as he set course back to the castle.

~~~~~

"Say it," Luna demanded.

"No," Shane folded his arms resolutely.

"Fluttershy!" Luna shouted toward the door.

"Waitwaitwaiteh ah ah ah nah ah no," he began to chatter, waving his hands in a deescalating fashion.

“Say it, then,” she ordered, suppressing a small grin. Fluttershy was nowhere near the tower. Luckily he didn’t seem willing to call her bluff.

He sighed, shoulders slumping. “*I’m sorry I accused you of rape,*” he mumbled.

“...and?” Luna awaited.

He gritted his teeth in frustration. “*Rape is not an appropriate subject for joking no matter how funny I think it is,*” he repeated Luna’s demands.

Luna nodded, satisfied. “Now. I have some work to finish.”

“What kind of work?” he prodded.

“Paperwork,” she droned none too happy with it herself.

“*Princess* paperwork?” he tacked on, grinning.

Luna sighed, “Yes, Major. *Princess* paperwork.”

Shane chuckled in a fashion that Luna would have sworn challenged the border of a giggle. Celestia had long since left them to their squabbling. She had to get back to her courts and meetings. Luna had yet to mention the letter to her. It could be done later. She had some time to spare.

It was raining now. The pitter-patter of droplets on the glass doors was soft and rhythmic. Luna plopped herself back in front of her desk, horn softly glowing. She dipped her quill once again and set back to glazing over legal forms before signing off on them.

Shane idled around Luna’s room while she worked. He poked at a large globe by Luna’s bookshelf. It was quite unique. It mapped, not the land, but the night sky. After ensuring it did *not* open into a mini-bar, he made himself busy by spinning it for several moments.

A brief time passed before the human became bored again. He wandered over to the princess, entertaining himself by leaning over her shoulder and watching her work in an exceedingly distracting

fashion. She allowed him to watch for a moment, knowing he would more than likely soon become bored again and wander off. Which he did, more quickly than she expected. He leaned on the edge of her desk and watched the rain through the glass, impatiently waiting for her to finish her work.

He picked up a tiny black notebook from Luna's desk, thumbing the pages disinterestedly, only to find it blank and placing it back where he found it.

He sighed loudly, letting it be plainly known that he wasn't happy with being ignored. "So what's on the agenda here?" he asked clearly having enough of the silence.

"I'll play with you later, Shane. I have to finish this first."

"No. I mean long term. *Game plan*."

"I'm afraid I don't have much in the way of specifics," she said as she continued scratching the quill against the parchment. "I imagine Celestia will want to begin orchestrating your formal public reveal."

"Do I have a vote in that?" he asked. Luna wondered if it was apprehension in his voice or that was just her imagination.

"Yes, and no," she answered frankly. "Our citizens have a right to know what's happening around them. Your arrival is a momentous milestone in our history. More so than you may truly understand," she tacked on giving him a sideways glance. "You, intentionally or not, have rewritten the way we understand the world around us. Rather drastically as well."

"Good?"

"It is neither good nor bad. It merely *is*. I shan't lie to you, human. I can think of no more than a few who will be less than thrilled to see you. Great changes are rarely bereft their share of conflict. Some ponies will not be ready to hear the truths that your existence denotes." Luna turned, looking at the human. "How do you think most humans would take the news were our positions reversed?"



“Not well,” he admitted.

“Then you understand our difficulty.” She turned back to her papers.

Shane’s brow furrowed at the prospect of being thrust into the spotlight. Luna preempted the question. “We shan’t be throwing you to the wolves, Major. No pony will *force* anything on you....but your cooperation will take that much more of the heat off of Celestia and I, if you understand my meaning.”

He nodded. Luna wasn’t sure if he actually understood or was merely nodding reflexively.

“I would worry overly much about it now. We have much to do before such thing come to pass. I am certain Celestia will want to learn more about you before we go and announce you’re here. It would be rather awkward making such an announcement and then be unable to answer any of the obvious follow up questions. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I suppose it would,” he murmured, his mind clearly elsewhere.

There was another knock on the door. Luna called for them to enter, pretending she hadn’t seen the human’s hand slip down to rest on the grip of his handgun.

Aegis poked his head in. Checking up on them as he promised he would.

“Hello, Commander,” Luna smiled at the stallion.

Shane’s eyebrow perked as the title left Luna’s mouth.

“Good afternoon, Princess.” Aegis bowed. “I merely wished to inform you that the humans have been moved to the lower chambers, we are just waiting on the final order before we begin the cremation.”

“Proceed, Commander,” Luna ordered.

Shane leaned toward Luna somewhat hesitantly. “...Uhm...You

don't think it's at all possible for me to...uh...go...to that, do you?"

Luna regarded Shane with sympathetic eyes. "I don't think it would be wise, Major," The human almost did a good job of hiding his disappointment behind a quick mask. "I'm sorry, Shane. But we've attracted a lot of attention today as it is."

He nodded in understanding.

Aegis listened to the exchange with an odd face.

Luna was right, though. It would require them to traverse through several heavily populated areas of the castle. It was not a smart idea. Duty often left desire in want.

Shane nodded again, as if convincing himself it was for the best. It was clear he wished otherwise but he wasn't about to protest.

Celestia appeared in the doorway moments later, visibly relieved to be through with politics for the day. Aegis rushed to bow after the admittedly stealthy alicorn had come up behind him.

Shane threw on a ghost of a smile. "Look who decided to show up." Despite the slight teasing he actually sounded rather happy to see Celestia.

"Hello, sister," Luna greeted warmly.

"Good afternoon everypony," Celestia said with a tired sigh and a soft smile.

Luna waiting for the human to correct Celestia's greeting, but he never did. "How did it go?" Luna asked Celestia interestedly.

"Not terribly. Dull if nothing else. I had more than a fair share of questions about our little light show this morning."

"What did you tell them?" Luna asked grinning.

"Oh you know how such things can skew after so many millennia. They just need the occasional recalibration." She winked

Luna grinned, happy with the excuse. "I do so hate to bring more to the plate, sister. But it seems another issue has reared its ugly head."

Celestia paused, giving Luna her attention. "What's wrong?"

"I received a letter from Magneus this morning," she said weightily.

Celestia became very still, suddenly very interested. "What about?"

"I'll give you three guesses," Luna sighed, nodding toward Shane. Celestia grew silent, contemplative.

"You don't think-"

"No. I don't think he knows," Luna cut her off. "I have an idea. But I'd like to discuss it with you first." Luna didn't have to say it. It was clear, that she had no intention of discussing in present company.

A small awkward silence ruled for a brief second.

"Well," Shane grinned. "I can take a hint." He stood from where he leaned against Luna's desk. "I need to go get some sleep anyway. I'll leave you to it." He pulled on his new desert blouse and grabbed his cover and effects. "Night, ladies."

"It's daytime," Luna noted casually.

"No one cares," he replied, mimicking her tone. He stepped toward the door, cocking an eyebrow at Aegis. "Wanna walk me home, sir?" He said with an amused grin.

Aegis smirked back at the pseudo formality but nodded toward the hallway. "I rate a *sir* from you now?" he noted as they left started down the corridor.

"Yeah. I never was great with the navy's chain, but I'm pretty sure you outrank me."

"...what?"

The door shut under Luna's magical influence, leaving the two alicorns to their chat.

Celestia blew an astral strand of mane from here eyes. "Alright, Luna, what is the problem now?" She spoke tiredly, feeling foolish for thinking that they may have enjoyed a brief respite from trouble.

Luna merely levitated the missive to her sister, allowing the solar alicorn to read it for herself.

~~~~~

The door shut behind the human and the armored stallion. "It's probably different for you guys," Shane continued as they walked. "I just thought I'd be nice and extend the courtesy. Is it a special billet or your actual rank?"

"Both, actually." Aegis noted.

"Oh-five?"

"Normally yes, but the but the station of Guard commander is actually an Oh-Seven billet," the stallion clarified.

The human whistled softly before saying something under his breath.

Aegis just shook his head and began to walk down the corridor, pausing only when he realized despite the sound of boots on marble, the human was not following.

Shane was walking in place outside the princesses' bedchamber door, his footfalls become slightly less heavy with each step until they sounded faint and far off.

Shane then just gave the Commander a grin and a thumbs up as he pressed his ear to the oak door.

"...What are you doing?" Aegis asked, smiling at the human's attempted eavesdropping.

“Tactical information acquisition,” he whispered. “Now shut up. I’m trying to hear.”

“You’re trying to spy on the princesses?”

“They’re hiding something. That’s not nice.” He adjusted his head against the door, struggling to make sense of the faint murmurs from the other side.

“*You* keep plenty of secrets,” Aegis pointed out, wondering how long it would take for the human to realize the room was sound proofed.

“*I* never once claimed to be nice,”

“You’re not going to hear anything.”

Shane nodded as if confirming something. “Yup...Mmm hmm. Mmm hmm.”

“There’s no way you can actually hear through that. It’s been soundproof-”

The doors both swung inward leaving Shane frozen in his very compromising position. Aegis smacked a hoof to his forehead as the human was caught red handed attempting to spy on the alicorns.

Shane slowly turned his head to the Princesses who were silently scrutinizing his position with cocked eyebrows and expectant visages.

He righted himself, coughing awkwardly into his fist, before nodding exaggeratedly. “Yep,” he tapped the door with a knuckle. “...*Oak*. That’s a ...fine door buildin’ material there.” He nodded again. “*WELP!* I should get going. You two...just ...keep doing what you doing.” He turned and walked back to his armored escort. “Goodnight, girls.”

“It’s *still* daytime,” Luna noted once again.

“And I *still* don’t care!” He shouted back down the hallway.

“Interesting,” Luna murmured. Once the human and Aegis were well beyond hearing range. Luna shut the door to her chamber door, turning back to her sister.

“I hope you’ve thought this through, Luna. Once we send this we won’t be able to take it back.” Celestia’s words were cautious and worried, very uncharacteristic for the white alicorn.

“It will happen sooner or later whether we wish it to or not,” Luna said sternly. “It is better we dictate the tempo of events lest somepony else do it for us. If we take the initiative the odds will fall, however slightly, in our favor. The risk is great but stagnation will only serve us ill.”

Celestia sighed. “...Very well.”

Luna levitated the neatly folded parchment to her sister.

Celestia’s horn flashed brilliant gold, like the sun, before the scroll vanished in a globule of green fire. The sparkling gray smoke sped for the open window and into the rainy sky faster than any natural breeze could carry it.

~~~~~

Finally back to its cell, Aegis stopped at the door stepping aside to let the human back into its appropriated dwelling. He allowed a breath of pent up apprehension dissipate. This was the first time the human had not been under direct alicorn supervision. Nothing went wrong. The walk had been quiet and uneventful.

Shane dumped his old clothes and diddy bag on the floor, unceremoniously kicking the mess underneath the cot and out of the way. He turned and plopped himself down on the canvas bedding, absentmindedly pulling out a pack of cigarettes before thinking better of it and stuffing them back into a pocket.

Aegis watched the human for a few short seconds before speaking. “You’ll be alright for the rest of the day?”

Shane ran a hand over his head taking a deep breath. “...Yeah. I think I’ll survive,” he murmured.

Aegis nodded, turning to leave.

“...Wait,” the human said softly.

Aegis turned back, curious. The human was looking at his boots, clearly uncomfortable.

“...Listen. I know you don’t owe me anything,” Shane said slowly. “And I probably got no right askin’ this of you.” Shane paused. “But I need you to do something for me.”

Aegis lifted an eyebrow at the human, giving the creature his undivided attention. .

~~~~~

His hooves were sore, but he wasn’t about to move. His watch would be over in a few hours. He wasn’t upset. The past few weeks had been more exciting than almost the entirety of his career. He was guarding a real life, no joke *ALIEN*. The first contact with an extra terrestrial in Equestrian history and HE was a part of it. It was exciting, like some wild story book. You couldn’t make this stuff up.

The step of armored hooves broke Auburn Sky from his thoughts. He snapped upright, as the guard commander exited the alien’s cell. Aegis didn’t acknowledge the young royal guard, nor the identical stallion opposite the door. The commander trotted briskly down the hallway, looking deeply concerned with something. Auburn imagined a conversation with an alien would indeed give one a lot to think about.

The commander had left the cell door open. The princess made it clear during their last briefing that the alien was not a prisoner, but she had also made it clear that it was rather fighty, and not overly fond of strange ponies. Auburn wasn’t on duty when the princess sent a young doctor down to try and stitch the human’s lacerated forelegs. But apparently she ended up fleeing the cell less than a minute later. No pony ever found out why.

A smarter pony would take the obvious signs to avoid the creature. But the mystery of it was only fueling Auburn’s curiosity. He heard

it...*him* speak before, it sounded like he spoke fluent Equestrian.

His list of questions seemed endless. But he knew he couldn't just walk in and ask it. They were told specifically not to approach the thing. Just keep ponies away, and if he tried to leave, *gently* encourage him to turn back and stay in the cell. Even if he refused they weren't supposed to physically touch the alien. The princess made that explicitly clear. If he became agitated they were merely to isolate and contain it, until one of the alicorns could intervene and detain it. They were only to use physical force against the creature under life or death circumstances.

Needless to say the rule irked more than a few royal guards. Just what was this thing capable of that was so terrible not even her majesty's elite were able to handle. Granted it was big, and the bizzare black metal clubs it carried around looked rather nasty. But there was only one of him. And from what the briefing said he couldn't even do magic.

Auburn let the questions ping around in his head for a bit. Letting the clock tick away the remaining hours of his shift. He could hear the alien rummaging around in his cell, doing whatever it is alien monsters do to pass the time.

The rummaging stopped. Auburn listened carefully, wandering what the alien was up to. He heard what sounded like the fluttering of pages in a magazine, before the creature let out a long, appreciative whistle.

Auburn craned his eye to his partner, Plate Mail. The identical armored stallion's eyebrow cocked from under his golden helm.

A flash of movement caused the two to freeze.

The alien had stuck his head and shoulders out the door frame. The two stood perfectly still as the alien came uncomfortably close. He would swing his head back and forth like a wolf sniffing the air as he inspected the two guards posted outside his door.

Auburn did his best not swallow nervously. To his credit he didn't even flinch, even when the alien swung his head over to stare



through the eye slots of Auburn's helm.

"Hey," the alien finally said in perfect Equestrian.

Auburn blinked, registering what had just happened.

The alien paused, after the lack of noticeable response. "You guys speak english?"

"Y-Yessir," Auburn eventually confirmed not exactly sure what he meant by *english*.

"Good." it grinned mischievously. "You wanna see something cool?"

~~~~~

Twilight let one amethyst eye flutter open. She could hear the patter of raindrops against the window pane. Not surprising. Who knows when the last time the pegasi gave Canterlot a decent soak? From the sound of those thunderclouds, not in a good long while.

She favored herself with a languished stretch, arching her back like a cat and savoring the texture of her downy sheets. The sun hadn't set yet, although you would barely know it through the pitch black storm clouds. Twilight had slept almost the entire day. She made a mental note to ensure the sleeping pattern not become habitual.

She let a long throaty yawn to escape before she settled in front of the well stocked vanity mirror in her room where she proceed to brush the tangles and knots from her long lavender hair.

Her morning ablutions complete, scant though they may be compared to Rarity's, she ventured out into the hallway. She was eager to jump back into her research. She trotted along happily humming to herself.

Twilight poked her head in Rainbow Dash's room. The snoring emanating from the bundle of sheets was more than sufficient to tell the unicorn that Dash would not be accompanying her this evening.

She sighed and retreated back into the hallway, quickly checking on the rest of her friends. Rarity was likewise asleep, but Pinkie,

Fluttershy, and Applejack were nowhere to be found.

The lack of coordination bothered Twilight slightly. They really needed to get on a consistent schedule. Their current, almost constantly, scattered status pretty much negated their usefulness as the elements of harmony.

She shook it off, deciding that she was merely being overly cautious. Still the thought warranted some further contemplation. She mentally filed it away for later.

Several hallways and passages later she happened upon a familiar orange pony in a familiar brown Stetson.

“Hey Applejack,” Twilight beamed, happy to see a friend in the waking world.

“Howdy, Twilight! I was just lookin’ fer you,” AJ smiled warmly. “Ya’ll ain’t seen Fluttershy ‘round here by any chance have ya?”

“Sorry, I haven’t seen her since yesterday.”

“I’m getting a mite worried about that girl,” Applejack shook her head. “I think she’s lettin’ this human thing get to her head.” AJ shook her head. “I just wish the big lug would let her off the hook.”

“I wish it were that simple, AJ,” Twilight mused sadly. “I’ll try and talk to him again, but I don’t think this is the kind of thing an apology fixes. It’s gonna take time.”

“I know,” AJ relented, “I just hate seeing her so broken up. Besides, remember *last time* some critters gave Shy the cold shoulder?” Applejack smirked.

“Wow,” Twilight chuckled. “There’s a scary thought.”

They laughed at the memory as they walked along, absentmindedly making their way to the library so Twilight could drop off the textbooks she borrowed a few days earlier. The elderly mare at the desk of the library made a small red stamp on the card inside the book’s binding, furthering Twilight’s spotless return record. She was very proud.

Twilight's horn glowed purple as the two mares prepared to step outside and into the dizzying downpour. A faint disc of purple appeared a few inches above their heads. Applejack smiled when she noticed the raindrops sliding off the side of the the sides, leaving the two perfectly dry.

"Handy little trick you got there," Applejack noted with a teasing smile.

"Mhm," Twilight beamed proudly as they made their way toward the imposing black dungeon. It was the most likely hiding spot for the human during daylight hours.

The guards opened the onyx doors for the two and they stepped inside, just in time for a peal of lightning to light the world for brief moment. The guttural rumble of thunder came only a second later, powerful enough to be felt deep in their chests as it shook the sky and earth.

The onyx doors shut behind them, sealing them away from the elements. After thanking the two armored guards, they set down the familiar corridor toward the maximum security cell that acted as Shane's living space.

It felt strange. Twilight couldn't place the feeling. Nothing appeared out of place. The hallways were empty and, minus the storm, everything was relatively quiet. Something was wrong. She just couldn't place it. She looked toward Applejack. The orange mare was peering about curiously but did not seem otherwise concerned. Twilight decided not to broach the subject. She was probably just being paranoid.

"What did ya need here again?" AJ asked.

"I was hoping Shane would let me write down some of the stuff he told us for my research." She pulled a little fresh notebook form her bag. "I really just wanted some more raw data before I bother starting any serious analyses. It won't take long. In and out. I promise."

They turned the final corner. Shane's massive steel door hung ajar.

Twilight stopped, she finally realized what was different, why the silence was so out of place. She touched Applejack on the shoulder, halting the earth pony.

“What’s wrong, Sugarcube?”

“...Where are all the guards?”

Applejack started to reply only to have the words die in her mouth. Twilight could almost see the realization washing over her. No guards stood outside the cell. They had not passed a single patrol. The only guards they saw were the two at the front door.

“One way ta find out,” Applejack took the first step toward the open cell door. Twilight followed closely.

The subtle sound of voices carried from the cell, piquing their curiosity. Getting closer she recognized one. It was the human’s voice. “Alright, shut up, shut up. Check this out, you’ll like this one,” he announced to whoever else was in the room. “This is the *centerfold*.”

Now she was just confused. The two mares poked their heads through the threshold, their jaws dropping slightly at the scene. There must have been ten armored guards packed into the cell, all of whom were crammed behind the human trying to get a better look at the flashy looking magazine the human was holding out in front of him. This was absolutely unprecedented behavior. The human had never even shown any hint of a semblance of interest in social interaction with her species. Yet here he was out of the blue surrounded by ponies he didn’t even know! Twilight couldn’t help but feel slightly snubbed.

“Ready?” Shane asked through the unlit cigarette in his teeth.

The mass of armored stallions muttered their impatient affirmative.

Shane let the sheet slip down, the centerfold unfurling into its three sectioned pages. Every head in the room cocked to the right to admire the centerfold in earnest.

Several sets of eyes grew very wide, and there were more than a

few appreciative ‘*ooohs*’. One stallion let out a whistle. Another seemed to finally find his voice. “I’m not even sure what I’m looking at...but *I like it*.”

Shane chuckled, “Well, you’re a dude, and some things are universal.”

“*What* are you doing?!” Twilight finally spoke, causing the mass of guards to shoot apart like they had been caught stealing cookies. Applejack attempted to conceal her chuckling.

“Uh oh,” Shane smiled, “Alright, everybody out. Party’s over.” He gave long sweeping gestures as if to cast the guards from the room, letting the magazine flutter along. There were a few grumbles but the guards all filed out, returning to their various posts.

Twilight picked up the magazine from the cot, not entirely sure she *wanted* to see what had all the stallions so worked up. She looked at the slightly wrinkled centerfold. She paused confused. “...what is this?”

“*That* is an *Audi R8 v10*. Pretty idn’t it?” He smiled proudly. His smile slowly faded when he saw Twilight’s still confused face. “...It’s a car....You know...*car*.” She still wasn’t getting the message. “You drive them around...to get places. It’s like...a carriage...only less gay...because it goes zero to sixty in like four seconds.”

Applejack joined Twilight inspecting the picture. “Wow, it’s fancy, whatever it is.”

Twilight had no choice but to agree. The machine was jet black with gleaming chrome accents. The lines were sleek and stylish. The tinted glass reflected light like polished basalt mirrors. It was an impressive looking machine. She spun through a few more pages. Finding more and more of the complicated vehicles in all manner of shape size and color.

“Okay, well...alright then. Sorry,” she stammered levitating the magazine back to the human.

“Why, what did you think it was?” Shane laughed.



*You don't have to do anything.* Aegis thought to himself staring a hole in his desk. The princess had made her wishes clear. He had little to no choice but to see them carried out, even if he disagreed. ...Then again it was the very same princess who had made it clear she wished him to use his better judgment if he saw fit. Could this be a test? He quickly dismissed the idea. The time of tests and games were long past. There were no safety nets anymore. He tried to distract himself with busywork, knowing very well that the window to act would eventually close and make the decision for him.

He scribbled on the parchment, listening to the large clock in the corner of his office slowly tick away the seconds.

He swore under his breath, standing up and throwing the quill back in its stopper. His mind repeated the potential consequences of his actions over and over, but above it all he could only hear one thing. Its hallowed request.

He was about to go do something very stupid. He pulled open the drawer at the bottom of his desk. The soft click of metal rising from the motion. The princesses may trust that thing. But he did not, so he would be taking as few risks as possible.

Aegis pulled the metal bands from the drawer, leaving his office before his common sense made him change his mind.

The old war horse trudged through the howling rain. The sun had yet to set. It even made fleeting attempts to pierce the midnight black thunderheads. The sheets of rain still poured relentlessly. The stallion pulled his cloak closer around himself. Throwing back his hood so the two door guards could identify him and open the large onyx doors.

He plodded down the corridors. Rain still dripped from his form as he walked the dim torch-lit passageway. He rounded the final turn. The door was already open.

He stood in the opening. The human was alone. Good. He was

sitting there, scribbling in a little black notebook. It didn't take long for him to notice the Commander. He stopped writing. Looking at the stallion with a flinty curious glare, he waited patiently for the commander to speak or attack, appearing equally prepared for either eventuality.

A peal of thunder seemed to accentuate the mood of uneasiness between the two.

"Follow me," the stallion beckoned.

A glimmer of recognition entered the humans eyes as he stood.

"One condition," Aegis stipulated. Causing the human to cock an eyebrow curiously.

Aegis threw a set of gleaming silver shackles at the feet of the human.

~~~~~

Celestia finished the last bit of her rose petal salad. It was a favorite of hers. She indulged herself every now and then. The rain was still hammering at the city, from the looks of it, it would continue through most of the night. Perhaps even into the morning.

The setting sun meant that soon she would be able to release Shane for the night. With Luna on the throne she actually found herself looking forward to the distraction of human-sitting. She had to admit, he had an interesting character. He was a puzzle piece that did not belong to her set. The more time she spent with him the more she gleaned about his own. She would be lying if she said that her academic and philosophical sides weren't quite enjoying the case study as well. After all, for as troublesome as it was, she was enjoying a position that most scholars and philosophers couldn't have conjured of in their dizziest daydreams. She still had much to learn about the human. And with that letter almost certainly on the griffon's desk by now, she would have to learn quickly.

She strolled leisurely to the dungeon, Shane's would-be apartment. Horn aglow, she maintained a small protective spell as the elements

howled against her magical barrier, leaving her perfectly dry and her feathers un-rustled. She entered the doors to the large black edifice, nodding thankfully to the bowing guards.

Luna would be raising the moon momentarily which should give her ample time to find out what...

She stopped. Part of her was thoroughly sick of these types of things. Her brow furrowed as she stood in the open doorway to Shane's cell. Shane's...empty cell.

"I should never have stopped locking him up."

~~~~~

The rhythmic beat of armored hooves could be heard even over the furious din of rain and wind. Shane had no difficulty keeping pace with the stallions at his sides. His long stride made up for his bipedal predilection. He didn't seem to mind the rain. In fact he seemed rather amused by the entire situation. He occasionally gazed down, fondly contemplating the steel braces locking his wrists together.

He followed the Commander. Paying little attention to his armored escorts. His boots falling almost softly on the pathway compared to the click of hooves on stone.

They walked toward the back half of the castle. It was late. The average pony would be home by now. Unfortunately the rain had caused several to linger. It was not a pleasant situation but Aegis was not about to go back on his word now.

An unexpected noise drew his attention. Shane was *chuckling* at something. The commander followed the humans gaze to a window in the rear wall of the castle.

There may have been a flash of movement. It was difficult to tell through the storm. "What was it?" Aegis shouted though the rain.

The soaked human merely grinned and shook his head. Continuing to walk though the howling storm





Star Shimmer rested her chin on the pane of one of the large castle windows. She didn't like the rain. She never did. Her father loved it, but he was a pegasus. He was *supposed* to like it. She on the other hoof had never cared for the stuff. It made everything mushy and humid and miserable. '*Although*', she conceded to herself as she admired the cathedral of thunderheads. '*I suppose nopony can say it isn't pretty in its own way.*'

An arc of lightning streaked across the sky, lighting the dark world for an instant. The glint of gold drawing her eyes to something she missed before.

There was a small formation guards making their way across the courtyard. '*What are they up to in the middle of this?*'

Another flash of lightning revealed the answer. Her heart began to beat at the sight. "What the hell is *that*?" she whispered to herself. It was tall, almost twice the size of anypony she had ever met. It two forelegs were bound in shiny steel braces like a prisoner. It stalked forward on two long legs following inside the center of guards. "Sweet, Celestia," she breathed.

As if it heard her his head turned to see the unicorn looking back out at him. Her blood froze. Could it see her? Should she move? Her pupils shrank as the thing curled back his lips, revealing a set of teeth that no herbivore would have any business having. He was *smiling* at her. The smooth rise and fall of his shoulders implying a kind of depraved amusement.

Her brain finally managed to get the message to her legs as she ducked out of sight. Her heart was hammering inside her chest. There was something very wrong going on in this castle. There was no denying it now. The past few weeks had been strange enough. She hadn't been the only one that noticed either. Guard shifts were erratic. The princesses were acting strangely. The entire hospital wing was closed. Now *this*? What was that thing?! Was it a prisoner? It was certainly no pony. Nor was it any creature she had ever seen, and when you work at the castle you tend to see quite a few. Prisoners don't ...*smile* like that. She reasoned. Why was it

here?

It was time for some answers.

~~~~~

Celestia rarely came to this part of the castle. It was dark, and dreary. She hadn't been down here in ages. She could already feel the oppressive heat through her fur. If it were not for the testimony of the door guard she might have no idea where they had gone.

Her destination came into view. Aegis stood outside the old iron door, along with six other guards. She was in the right place.

"Princess," Aegis bowed, not appearing overly surprised by her sudden appearance.

"I will deal with you later, Commander." The words were cold. She stepped past the stallion and pressed a golden hoof against the seemingly ancient iron door. The noise it made when she pushed was like a desperate cry for oil from the throats of a thousand rusty hinges.

She stepped inside the near pitch black room. The heat nearly choking the air from her lungs. There were several small reinforced windows inside several blast doors along the one wall. Through each window a roaring inferno could be seen, providing the only light in the blackness.

The crematorium.

She could wager a guess or two about who the unfortunate souls were inside the ovens. Which would also explain the lone human sitting on the floor along the far wall. He pressed his back against the wall, resting his arms over his knees. A slender cigarette sat between his fingers. His head rested against the dark stone as he watched the flames with a steely expression. He didn't even turn to look at Celestia.

The princess sighed, slowly walking over to where the human sat. She seated herself next to him, barely close enough for their shoulders to brush as they sat and watched the orange tongues of

fire lick at the small rectangular windows.

Neither one said anything. It wasn't necessary. She hoped just the simple act of being there said all she needed to. Minutes passed as she idly wondered how he could stand to smoke in the already hot thick room.

It was Shane that eventually decided to speak first. It was soft, but loud enough for Celestia to make out. "I wish I could say I was used to it by now," he took a hefty drag on the cigarette. "Then again part of me's kinda glad I'm not."

Celestia understood, probably better than anypony. Unfortunately there was little she could do to ease the human's grief. There were no shortcuts to be had here. It was merely a fact of life. "You were close to them?" Celestia asked quietly.

He took awhile to respond. "You could say that," he whispered back, still staring at the flames. "We were a family. A twisted, broken, fucked up parody of a family. But still family." He crossed his arms over his knees, shaking his head, frustrated. "I...I wish I had the words to explain it... But it's just something you *know*. We didn't even get along half the time. But it's still there. It's something you only understand if you've been there." Celestia carefully listened to the human try and communicate his feelings. His shoulder slumped as his head sagged. Clearly feeling as though he failed to convey his point. "They were my brothers..." he finally whispered. "And I've had to bury far too many of them." Shane stuck what was left of the cigarette in his lips, burning the stick down to the filter. The human snorted. "*Boohoo, right?*" he added icily. He stuck the smoldering stub under the heel of his boot, grinding it into oblivion.

It took a considerable amount of resolve to force back the lump in Celestia's throat. The human's confession hit closer to home than she was willing to admit. She didn't let any tears fall. They wouldn't help either of them. She didn't say she was sorry. He would have felt only contempt for her pity. She just leaned over slightly. The soft pressure of her shoulder against his letting him know she was there. She worried that he might not appreciate the contact. He was rather touchy after all.

Her worries vanished when she felt the human actually lean back into Celestia. It was an unexpected gesture, though not entirely unwelcome. She could not ease the pain. But she would try. If that meant simply being the company to his misery, then that is what she would do.

They sat a bit longer, both content to watch the inferno through the glass until Celestia finally thought to speak. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to swing ‘*American soil*’. But I’ll make sure we find them a good place to rest.” She spoke with an almost hint of tease, nudging him with her wing, hoping she wasn’t overstepping her bounds.

Shane scoffed, grinning painfully, at the unexpected remark. “Make it a place with a view,” he demanded, mimicking her teasing tone.

“I think I can arrange something,” she smiled back. She finally stood. Turning back to the still seated human. “Come along, Major. It’s best not to burden the dead with our troubles. You’ll have to suffer though *us*, for the time being.” She smiled sweetly, offering her hoof to the human.

Shane regarded the proffered hoof with a sad grin. “Well...seeing as you’re all I got left...” He reached up grabbing hold of Celestia’s golden shod hoof and allowing her to help him to his feet.

Celestia left through the old iron portal. Shane looked one last time at the row of blazing furnaces. He blinked a few times before grasping the iron handle and pulling the door shut with a grinding boom.

~~~~~

A quill scratched against yellowing parchment. It was his own feather. An old primary, re-purposed into a writing instrument. A far reaching tradition, but he still adamantly insisted they wrote better than any store bought quills.

He placed it back in its stopper, flexing his claw sorely. His talons stretched, although well taken care of, the copious amounts of writing was one of the most unsavory aspects of his job. But someone had to do it, and Magneus was not to type of griffon to

shirk his duty because of a mere claw cramp.

A faint shimmer caught his attention. A thin haze of smoke was slowly worked its way in between the shutters of his office window. He brightened considerably. It appeared Princess Luna finally managed to respond to his letter. He did so love her night sky. He often had to make sure not to bother her with his questions overly much whenever he managed to sneak a word or two in with her at the occasional summit or political function. Although she never seemed to mind fielding them, bless her heart.

He couldn't wait to see what she sent him about this fabled meteorite. Maybe she would even send him a sample. The national museum would be thrilled.

The smoke swirled before materializing with a pop into a single solitary scroll.

Disappointment colored the griffon's emotions as he reached for the small letter. Maybe there never was a meteor. He shouldn't have gotten so excited over a rumor. He sliced the ribbon with a talon before unfurling the scroll. Princess Luna's writing was not exactly the easiest to read. Not that it was messy, quite the opposite in fact. It tended to be very elegant and ornate. Perhaps a bit too much so. It was a bit...archaic. Still, Magneus managed without too much difficulty.

*Prime Minister,*

*It was a pleasure to hear from you. I am glad to see you still have not let your duties prevent you from enjoying the occasional hobby.*

*I'm sure you will be happy to know that the rumors you heard were indeed correct. I am impressed they managed to spread so quickly. We do in fact have the 'meteorite' in our possession at this time. It has proven quite educational.*

*I would of course be more than happy to share my notes with you, however if I may be so bold as to offer you one better. It would be my great pleasure to invite you to Canterlot so that you may view the object yourself. I can assure you it is something you would find very*

*enlightening.*

*For your consideration, of course, Prime Minister.*

*Your friend, Princess Luna.*

# ARTICLE 2 Part XIV

## ARTICLE 2

### Part XIV

~~~~~

“You understand the severity of your actions, do you not, Commander?” Celestia asked neutrally.

“I do,” he answered without pause. No trace of regret in his voice.

“Did my sister not make it perfectly clear that the human was not to be taken through the residential wing of the castle?” her voice picked up an almost imperceptible bite.

“She did, highness.”

“And yet despite this you willingly and knowingly transported the human who is, I might add, still possibly the most closely guarded secret in Equestrian history, through an area known largely for heavy civilian traffic.”

“Yes, your highness,” he admitted after a brief pause.

Her horn glowed and a stack of yellow files dropped on the desk. “Five reports of a strange creature sighted along with a company of guards. Five! Those only the ones that actually bothered to file a report. Who knows how many actually saw you.” Celestia had an amazing way of sounding angry without ever raising her voice. She sighed and closed her eyes contemplatively, much like one would who was about to plunge themselves into something unsavory. “Commander, you have devotedly and honorably fulfilled the duties of your station for nearly twenty years. I can say without flattery or embellishment that your service has been one of the most valuable assets to my rule in living memory.” Aegis sat silently, the praise causing him more discomfort than the reprimand. Celestia

continued anyway. "It is because of these reasons I am giving you this chance to explain yourself to me now privately. For what reason did you consider this an acceptable action, commander?"

Aegis stiffened himself. This wasn't the first time he'd been chewed out in his long career, although this may be the last. He was ready for it. He chose to act. He would live with the consequences without regret. "It was the right thing to do, Princess," he stated simply but resolutely. "The human had a right to commend his brethren to the ashes. To deny a warrior, regardless of race or species, the right to attend their dead is an insult I refuse to give." Aegis squared his jaw at the snow white alicorn across from him.

Celestia stared back, unmoving. "You gambled the entirety of our efforts on a courtesy," Celestia stated coldly.

"It was the right thing to do, highness," he repeated.

Celestia sighed as she stared out the window at the night sky. "Yes, Commander. It was the right thing to do," she said quietly before turning back to the stallion across the desk. "But it was not smart thing to do."

"Then I am simply to ignore my conscience the moment it becomes inconvenient?" Aegis retorted somewhat icily.

"No, Commander I am not being patronizing when I say you did do the right thing. I merely wish you hadn't." Celestia exhaled. "Your heart is in the right place. Unfortunately our current predicament does not look favorably upon sentiment. Regardless of how well placed it may be. I have no doubt your actions earned our species incalculable brownie points with the human, and as valuable as that is, you need to understand it will all be for naught if we lose control of our public policy." Celestia paused. "But I digress." Her voice became softer and yet somehow noticeably colder. "I think you know I wouldn't bother wasting both our precious time on a simple tongue lashing." Aegis' face turned to stone. "I need you to know if you are capable of playing this game, Commander. Because if you are not ...I will find somepony who can."

Aegis stared back into the princess' usually warm rosy eyes. The



glittering pink irises showed no sign of exaggeration. “Forgive my ...impertinence, Princess, but I can’t help but feel like you already have.”

Celestia leaned back, her idle silence more incriminating than any denial ever could be. Aegis resisted the urge to grin at his success in reading the immortal alicorn’s ministrations so readily. “Perceptive as always,” she mumbled almost sourly. “I’m not going to be as frank as possible, Aegis. Your assumptions are not incorrect. But I did not summon you here to merely save face before I strike you from the board. It may relieve you to know that it is not your job I am after. Quite the opposite.”

Aegis ground his teeth, thoroughly tired of the alicorn dancing around the conversation. “Enough games, princess. You’ve made your point. Either fire me or let me get back to work. I don’t have time for the theatrics.”

Celestia suppressed a ghost of a grin, at the stallion’s outburst. Any doubt she harbored was now gone from her mind. “You shall retain your post, Commander. I would never ask you to abandon your honor. If morals were so easily altered they would cease to be morals. It is one of the many reasons that have kept you in your position for so long. I merely needed to ensure that you were still that stallion.”

The older stallion blinked confused. His face still bore an uncertain hostility.

“It has become apparent to me, however, that perhaps I have laid too broad a task upon your shoulders.” Celestia’s long alabaster horn lit with golden magic and a small but ornate looking book appeared out of thin air. She began skimming pages as she continued to speak. “While I have no doubt in your abilities, this is hardly the type of job you are accustomed to. And I can not help but feel that when confronted by rather convoluted situations like this one you may have some difficulty making informed decisions when you have only vague orders from my sister and I, and your own sense of duty to rely on.”

Celestia paused and lifted her eyes over her small book as if

expecting a response. "I suppose I can not disagree. I feel no shame in admitting that such situations are beyond my usual scope of experience." Aegis admitted.

"I thought as such," she returned to skimming her book, her magical influence seeking the desired page. "And so, I have formulated a possible solution." She smiled to herself. Aegis sat and waited. Celestia had a tendency for theatricality even in conversation. Aegis just wished she would come out with it already. "I am appointing you an advisor. An assistant if you will."

The stallion repressed a frown. "Somepony to keep me in check?"

"Somepony to ease your burden," she euphemized. "I think an extra set of hooves will do you well. Two pairs of eyes can never see the same sunrise exactly the same way," she mused sagely. "You acted as best you could with what limited information you had. Yet despite that it could have easily derailed weeks of careful planning." She had finally stopped skimming pages, placing a small dog ear on one page.

"I feel like this decision has already been made," Aegis said neutrally.

"The summons went out a few hours ago." Celestia said finally.

"Who?" Aegis said, not exactly happily.

"Well I couldn't pull an officer with sufficient rank from the military without drawing unnecessary attention. I also feel it may convey the wrong message." She smiled clearly pleased with herself. "We are expanding, Commander, but to do that we will need to bring more hooves into the loop than we currently have. So I have decided to, as they say, kill two birds with one stone." She deftly pushed the small ornate book across the desk to where the stallion sat. He made no move to open it, but she continued regardless. "I think you'll come to appreciate the selection." The princess got up as if to leave. She arranged her wings and gracefully began to walk toward the door. "He was one of your old cadets if memory serves."

The princess opened the large door that led to her office, leaving Aegis alone with the book. The older stallion deftly flipped to the dog-eared page. It was a service record complete with a name and photograph.

“Huh,” he almost laughed. This was a face he hadn’t seen in awhile.

~~~~~

Thump... Thump... Thump... Thump ...Thump

He had been at it for almost an hour straight. The human lay sprawled on the ground inside his cell, every few seconds pounding on the large steel door with the heel of his boot. Celestia deposited him here while she took care of some business with the Commander. More importantly, she had locked him in here while she took care of some business with the commander. The human was making his displeasure with being, once again, locked up incontestably evident by irritating his guards to no foreseeable end.

Word on the street was he had snuck out late last evening and made somewhat of a public appearance by the royal apartments. Just a rumor of course but still... it would make sense of the princess’ actions... and by extension, human’s newfound hobby.

The two guards resisted the urge to plug their ears with cotton or open the door and ask him to stop. It was probably exactly what he wanted anyway. Regardless, their salvation came in the form of a young purple unicorn.

The pounding stopped as the mechanical gears sounded with sonorous clicks as the machined pieces tumbled into place.

Twilight waited patiently for the door to open fully. Shane was on his back, cleaning his fingernails with a long black knife. Leg cocked in the air in mid kick. He perked up to look at the visitor. He smiled when he saw it was Twilight. A gesture she did not feel inclined to return.

“Thirty minutes,” she said tiredly. “I leave you alone for thirty

minutes maybe an hour... and you run off, parading around the castle in broad daylight.”

Shane’s smile only widened, revealing a few teeth before it faded. “First of all it was not broad daylight. It was dark and stormy, and I had to take care of something,” he said quietly returning to his grooming.

Twilight huffed, letting her neck and shoulders sag. “I know.” She righted herself brushing an errant strand of lavender hair from her eyes. “The Princess told me,” was her answer to the human’s raised eyebrow.

“Ah,” Shane said in mock surprise. “Well then,” he pulled up his legs rolling backwards until he was on his legs again, coming to a stand, reminding Twilight somewhat of an excitable foal that just learned to successfully somersault.

Shane slid the combat knife back into the molded plastic sheath on the back of his belt. “I guess that’s why you’re here.” He stretched his arms behind his back. “What else did she tell you?”

“Nothing really,” Twilight answered. “She just asked me to come keep stay with you until she gets back from meeting with Aegis.” Shane paused for a moment after that, scratching the back of his head somewhat guiltily.

Twilight decided to cut off the silence before it could take root. “Where’d you get the knife?” She asked eyeing the newest addition to his person.

“One of the many goodies in my bag of tricks. I can’t leave home without it,” he plucked it from his belt and flipped it to offer the weapon to the unicorn, handle first.

Twilight plucked the weapon from his hand with a spell. Purple magic wrapped around the synthetic rubberized handle and drifted closer to her eyes. It was a long black partially serrated blade, ending with a short black cross guard, complete with a metal loop which must have served a separate purpose. The matte black finish was worn in places exposing the silver metal underneath. It was

well-loved to be sure. There was even a small chip in the blade right above the serrations. But the double edged clip point was needle sharp, and the blade was like a razor. 'COMBAT U.S.M.C' was stamped in the base of one side. 'ONTARIO KNIFE CO.' was stamped on the other.

Shane watched Twilight expectantly. Twilight wasn't sure what to say about the knife. "It's ...very nice?"

It must have been enough because Shane smiled happily accepting the knife back from Twilight. "Hang on," he said sheathing the blade and digging through his bag.

After a few moments of noisy searching, he brought back a long bundle wrapped in an old cloth like a mummy from a storybook. He unwrapped it slowly revealing another blade. It was smaller than the other, but it was much more ornate. It rested in an old black leather sheath, decorated with intricate scrollwork in the shape of a large majestically posed stag. The handle was polished ebony with silver accents and a molded silver pommel.

Shane held it firmly but reverently. Twilight couldn't help but feel like he was showing her something significant. "This," he started, "belonged to my great granddaddy." Shane unclasped the leather strap holding the blade in place, pulling the knife from its home and exposing the silver blade. "Almost a hundred years old. My dad gave it to me before I went on my first deployment."

He offered Twilight the hunting knife and she gingerly accepted it. Even she had to admit it was impressive. Intricate and sleek, unlike the efficient and utilitarian combat knife, this one was the result of an artisan. The knife had two sets of engravings. "Hallowed Ground" was in the center in a script that looked oddly similar to Old Equish. SOLINGEN, GERMANY was at the base, stamped in block letters.

"Solingen, Germany?" Twilight repeated out loud.

"The City of Blades," Shane smiled.

"It's beautiful," she admitted. She was telling the truth. It was truly

the work of a master craftsman. But Twilight's mind was too occupied with the insight into the reclusive human's personal life to genuinely appreciate it. "He's mentioned his father before. Maybe that's all the family he has." She wondered passing the hunting knife back to the human who gingerly wrapped it and put it away.

"It's kinda funny if you think about it," he mused. "For all our wondrous inventions over countless centuries... we still haven't replaced the sharp piece of metal."

"Well speaking of innovation... have you written anything in that notebook I gave you yet?"

"Hmm?" Shane started, as if remembering the unicorn was talking to him. "Oh. That. No. Not really." Twilight's eyes lost a bit of their hopefulness. "I tried," he offered upon seeing her deflate. "I sat down to do it and just couldn't think of where to begin. There's so much to explain, I could fill a hundred notebooks and not put a scratch on the tip of the iceberg."

"That's okay. I wasn't hoping for a comprehensive encyclopedia," she laughed softly. "If anything, just picking an aspect at random and starting to write can help make the rest come a little easier. Think of the notebook as just a medium to get your thoughts out so you can organize them later." Shane sat back on his too-small cot and ran his fingers through his hair. Twilight made a small circle before resting on the floor of the padded cell, crossing her forelegs. "It was a trick Princess Celestia taught me when I was just a filly."

Shane cocked his head as he examined the small purple unicorn. "You look up to her don't you?" It was really more of a statement than a question but Twilight answered anyway.

"Of course I do."

Shane merely rested his elbows on his knees, as he leaned toward the lavender pony. "Why?"

Twilight blinked. It was a terribly simple question. One of the ones that's seems so obvious and yet you find yourself stumbling for an answer. Why did she look up to Celestia? "She's the Princess. Co-

ruler of Equestria. And she's been my mentor ever since I was little."

"You're not answering my question."

Twilight frowned, still trying to find the appropriate descriptive words. "Why are you asking?"

"That's irrelevant."

"I disagree," Twilight objected.

After a very brief silence he sighed. "I've seen the way you all look at her. It's this disturbingly genuine cross between love and horror. I just want to know why all of you have so much blind faith in her?"

It suddenly clicked in Twilight's mind. He was digging for information. He didn't care if Twilight believed in Celestia, he was after a reason why HE should. It was easy to forget but the human had only been conscious a matter of days. He was still trying to piece all the players together in his head.

"She's kind, intelligent, ancient, powerful, fair, and beloved by her subjects. But above it all? I think I look up to her because she was wise in ways nopony else was. It seemed like she always had the answers."

Shane smiled. "Wise," he annunciated. The human grinned as if it were an unspoken joke.

"What's so funny?"

Shane just kept smiling. "Don't envy the wise." He shook his head. "Pity them." He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and packed them against his palm. "It's just a word that means you had a very hard life."

"I do hope the wondrous irony of what you just said isn't lost on you, Major," Princess Celestia said from the open doorway.

"I really wish it was," he mumbled as he lit a cigarette.

“Princess!” Twilight jumped in surprise. “How...How long have you been there?”

“Oh long enough to hear you call me ‘ancient’.” Celestia teased the abashed young unicorn as she plucked the smoldering cigarette from Shane’s mouth and crushing out the burning tip in a cloud of magic.

“I didn’t... I didn’t mean it like...” Twilight fumbled.

“Oh relax, Twilight. I’m only teasing. And flattered though I may be, if I did have all the answers we wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with.” She winked at her pupil, as she passed the now lifeless cigarette to Shane.

He plucked it from the magical cloud dejectedly. He sighed and let it fall onto the floor. “To what do I owe the pleasure, princess.”

“I figured you’d enjoy some time out of your cell.”

“Aren’t you the one that locked me in here not two hours ago? I thought I was being punished,” he grinned.

“Not exactly. While I am in no way ignoring your role in that little adventure I am aware that it was done with no nefarious intent and therefore I am able to overlook much of the blame. Although rest assured, Major, I am enacting several... revisions in protocol to ensure such negligence’s in judgment do not occur in the future.”

“Joy,” he said, flatly.

“Well we’re on your time now, Major,” The alicorn said, changing the subject. “Is there anything you want to do?”

“A bar is probably out of the question?”

“That’s putting it lightly,” she smiled.

“You never did give me that tour.”

“I do believe you’re right,” Celestia smiled. “The rain has finally let up. I think that’s an excellent idea.”



Shane actually brightened considerably. He rolled to his feet, nudging the lavender unicorn with his boot, encouraging her to do the same. "Come on, Sparky. We're going for a walk."

Twilight muttered distastefully as she rose to her hooves. It was not the first time somepony had bestowed the nickname upon her. Needless to say she was not overly fond of the title.

Shane plucked his shotgun from his cot in favor on the other weapons. Slinging it after slipping on the armored vest, the small screen in the shoulder plate read several green numbers as it registered the new occupant.

"Must you?" Twilight nodded at the large weapon.

Shane pretended to think. "Yes," he concluded.

Celestia merely rolled her eyes before beckoning with a shrug of her wing.

~~~~~

"How do I know this isn't fake?" the burly brown earth pony said from behind the magnifying glass.

Snapshot grinned as he slammed a folder of documents on the desk. He was clearly prepared for the accusation. "I had it confirmed by two independent film studios. It's real. I took it to a zoologist, a veterinarian, and the office of foreign affairs," he tapped the picture, "and THAT THING doesn't exist."

"So what does that mean to me?" The gruff stallion sat back, failing to keep the interest out of his voice.

"It means," Snapshot sat back as well, "that as far as the government is concerned. This two-legged-wonder doesn't exist." Snap leaned forward. "So why are the Princesses waltzing around in the dark of the night with an unregistered monster of a creature? If it's merely a newly discovered society why wouldn't they alert the office of foreign affairs?" The gruff stallion maintained his impassive visage. "They're keeping it secret."

“Why?” The stallion asked finally.

“Speculation, my friend, is your job. I’m not concerned with ‘why’. What matters is this alarming and rather incriminating picture. A picture that could be your next front page story. The why, I shall leave to you.”

The gruff pony grinned. This kid was saying all the right things. “So the why isn’t your concern. Then what is?”

Smiling, the stallion reached across the desk bringing the photograph and slipping it back into a yellow folder. “The price.”

~~~~~

Celestia gracefully rose to the top of the winding staircase. Trotting into the observatory she turned expectantly awaiting the rest of her party. Twilight popped into the chamber close behind Celestia. The young mare trotted happily into the chamber eager to share the room with her new human friend.

After several moments of awkward waiting an arm finally breached the hole in the floor, grasping at the floor and dragging the attached body up over the precipice. Shane climbed above the top stair, heaving breath and beads of sweat covering his brow. Shane righted himself taking breathes in deep gasps. “...fuck... stairs,” he breathed tiredly. “Remind me to ...teach you the magic of elevators.”

“Oh it wasn’t that many,” Celestia teased, making light of the near sixty some odd flights of steps.

“You have more legs than me,” Shane pointed, wiping the sweat from his brow and stretching his massive frame.

“And I’m sure all those cigarettes have nothing to do with it,” she nagged.

“I don’t need your sass, woman,” Shane warned tiredly.

“You gonna be alright?” Twilight chuckled.

“Oh sure,” Shane answered with a pained grin. “This can be my punishment for not hitting the gym lately.”

Celestia made a mental note of the comment. Some exercise wouldn't be too bad an idea for the human's free time. It would let him get some much needed activity and also hopefully burn some of his excess energy ...Before he found some other way to entertain himself, she frowned assuming whatever it would be would make her life difficult.

Shane finally caught his breath, taking the opportunity to observe the room in earnest.

The room was dark, but the glowing half moon shone through a rectangular slit along the diameter of the dome roof. The entire structure was capable of rotating. You wouldn't know it by looking though. The massive bearings were concealed by a large band of gold running along the baseboard of the chamber. The interior of the globular room was painted black, to imitate the night sky.

But most impressive of all were the enchanted glittering dots on the inside of the roof. They each glowed like small silver suns, made to perfectly mimic the complex of stars in the night sky. It was a poor substitute for the real thing, but it made the tasks of locating constellations a bit less tedious.

The human whistled quietly as he beheld the room's main ornament. A positively massive telescope dominated the room, making everything else seem rather small and delicate by comparison.

“What do you think?” Twilight asked from the center of the room. She swept her hoof in an inviting gesture.

Shane walked forward slowly examining the large ocular device. “I think ya'll got a big ass telescope,” he said eloquently.

“We do indeed,” Celestia said proudly, ignoring the language. “Although Luna should really be the one to give this part of the

tour. I'm sure once she hears I brought you here she'll insist on bringing you back so you can view her constellations properly."

"Well then do me a favor," Shane started prodding the telescope's eyepiece curiously, "and let's not tell her I was here." He peeked through the lense. Shane pulled back with an amused grin. "Heh, I've actually never been in an observatory," he commented idly.

"You have them though, do you not?" Celestia asked.

"Yeah, I just never been to one. I always liked the pictures though." he absentmindedly chatted as he looked through the eyepiece. "I used to have an app that sent pictures to my phone from the all the satellite telescope doo-dads."

"Satellite telescopes?" Twilight asked confusing lacing her voice.

"Yeah," Shane pulled away from the eyepiece looking at the confused unicorn. "They got couple big powerful telescopes and shot em' into space. Now they go around taking pictures of stuff."

"Who's they?"

Shane shrugged, "I dunno.... buncha smart NASA people?"

"What's NASA?" the unicorn pressed, eyes alight.

"The National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Basically the people who are in charge of launching stuff into space... like telescopes."

Twilight was entranced by the concept. "That's amazing! How do they send the pictures back to the surface?"

Shane thought for a second. "...Science."

Twilight eyed him flatly. "You don't know, do you?"

"I do not," he confirmed.

Twilight sighed dejectedly. "That's disappointing."

Shane saw the unicorn deflate. His face screwing up mock offense. "Oh I know. You wish you coulda' got saddled with someone a bit more ...scholarly." He smiled somewhat sadly. "And here I thought you liked me for me."

"No! I didn't mean it like that," Twilight assured, worried she had given the wrong impression. "I mean that's not to say I wouldn't like more information, it's just that... I mean. I know it's not your fault. I didn't mean to-" Twilight yelped as the human stooped down and wrapped an arm around her neck, locking her head in place while he mussed up her mane with his knuckles. Much like her brother would do when they were foals.

"You need to relax, kid. I'm only messing with you. I'm not that easy to offend," he laughed as the little unicorn attempted to break free of the human's hold.

Celestia chuckled at the two. "I don't know about that, Major. You're awfully angry for someone who isn't that easy to offend."

Shane unceremoniously dropped the unicorn from his affectionate noogy-ing, leaving her a disheveled mess on the floor. "No no no. I'm not easy to offend. I am, however, very easy to piss off." He corrected. "They're different. Ya'll piss me off about six ways from Sunday but I'm not offended." He explained as Twilight brushed herself off. "Trust me. You'll know when I'm offended."

Celestia smiled, tilting her head. "Is that a threat, Major?"

"Do you want it to be?" he cocked his head in return.

"Answers never come easily from you do they?" Celestia sighed.

"You don't ask the right questions."

"Case and point," Celestia concluded.

"So what do you people do for fun around here?" he asked ignoring Celestia's comment. "I assume you all had lives before I got here. Yeah?"

"I like to read," Twilight offered simply.

“Stop the presses,” Shane teased. “I mean fun. Not casual hobbies.”

“Reading is fun.” Twilight mumbled under her breath.

“So how about it, Sunshine?” He asked the solar alicorn.

Celestia sighed. “Oh I’m afraid I don’t get out as often as I used to. I never really had time for hobbies while Luna was gone, but I assure you the castle is equipped to satiate almost any desire you possibly dream up.”

“I don’t know about that, Princess. I got a lotta vices,” Shane smiled.

“Oh I have no doubt. I wouldn’t worry about it overly much though, Major. I’m afraid over the next few weeks we’re going to be very busy. I’m sure we’ll have no shortage of things to keep you occupied.”

The human chuckled, unfolding his arms and pushing away from the massive telescope. “You’re really gonna sit there and tell me that there isn’t a single thing you do for fun.”

“I find happiness in many things,” Celestia remanded. “I enjoy short flights before sunset, walking in my rose garden, a cup of tea-”

“Not your internet dating profile, Princess. This isn’t a press conference. You can actually be honest.” He interrupted. “Come on. FUN! What does a princess do when she decides to cut loose?” The human bobbed up and down, grinning encouragingly.

Celestia took a breath. “Sometimes I tell my advisors I have an important meeting and take an afternoon off and I sit in a bubble bath with a glass of wine and carton of ice cream,” She admitted blushing slightly. She omitted the fact that such evenings were occasionally accompanied by trashy novels. Even princesses are allowed a guilty pleasure.

The human immediately burst into a fit of delighted laughter. “There you go!” He beamed. “So there IS someone somewhere under the crown! Good shit! We’re makin’ some progress.”

Celestia couldn't suppress her own grin. She almost never got the chance to have such casual conversations. Most everyone she knew treated her as their ruler and princess. The human on the other hand didn't seem to care in the slightest for any of her titles or estates. Most ponies had a preconception of the princess that shaped their behavior toward her. While Shane didn't have any prior experiences of anypony in Equestria at all. He disliked everypony equally, and Celestia found that paradoxically beautiful. She found herself oddly eager to see what future conversations could bring.

The collective laughter subsided. Twilight found herself wiping tears from her eyes. She was probably one of the few ponies alive that could boast a closeness to the Princess. Celestia had practically raised her during her fillyhood tutelage. And yet even she had never heard the alicorn admit any such vices. It was easy to forget that the Princess was in fact still a pony under all the prestige.

"Ooh I know where to go next," Celestia chimed. "I think you'll appreciate this next stop, Major. Long ago it was one of my favorite places in the castle."

The human shrugged his armor into a more comfortable position, sticking a thumb into the strap of his slung shotgun and gesturing with his free hand.

"Lead the way."

~~~~~

The nocturnal alicorn princess stamped angrily though the lower halls of the dark castle, she had a bone to pick with a certain trans-dimensional biped. It didn't take long to follow the breadcrumbs of Celestia and the human, leading her to a large underground chamber.

The hall was roughly carved out of one of the old caverns that spider webbed the mountain beneath the city. A massive basin was cut into the floor of the chamber and lined with dark green marble. The basin was filled with water, creating a pool almost the size of a

hoofball field. The soft roar of a small artificial waterfall on the far side made the cavern feel almost natural. A few centuries ago it was a bathhouse. Although such social practices had long since been abandoned, the facility still appeared to be well maintained.

Luna spotted her sister easily enough. Even in the dimly lit chamber the sunny white alicorn wasn't exactly easy to overlook. Celestia sat next to Twilight by the edge of the large basin. Her sister was without her golden slippers as she contentedly dipping her hooves in the warm water, a relaxed smile on her face.

Twilight sat dutifully next to the alicorn although she didn't seem as eager to get wet, satisfied instead to sit and chat with her mentor while scribbling in a little black notebook.

What Luna didn't see was any trace of certain humans that may or may not have some explaining to do about the state of her royal bathroom wall.

She didn't have to wait long. A head soon breached the water ever so briefly before dipping back down under the surface. This time Luna's eyes followed the human shaped shadow under the dark water. It seems Celestia found an exercise the human could enjoy that was in a secluded place. Luna had to admire the idea, she had forgotten this room was even still here. And admittedly she just assumed the human couldn't or didn't like to swim. Ponykind wasn't exactly known for their stellar aquatic abilities. It was more of a recreation involving parasols and floating rafts rather than a proper form of exercise. She had not thought to even ask the human if it held any interest.

She remembered she was supposed to be angry and quickly furrowed her brow to reflect the emotion as she stomped closer to the edge of the marble basin, waiting for the human to resurface.

"Major!" Luna echoed through the large chamber, only a few decibels shy of the Royal Canterlot Voice. The human turned to see the Lunar princess, raising an eyebrow but keeping most of his head under the waterline. "Wouldst thou like to explain who exactly is 'Wagner' and WHY you felt it necessary to display his explicit sexual preferences in permanent ink on our bathroom wall?"



The human immediately cracked an enormous grin and started chuckling. "Ah, That..." He began slowly making his way toward the edge by which Luna stood speaking as he lazily swam. "...is an ancient and important tradition of my people. It falls to all Marines to inscribe the sacred message on all bathrooms, restrooms, water closets, loo's, and porta-johns, that they cross. So that all that will know...that Wanger lov-"

"THANK YOU, Major. I read it," she interrupted, "You need not repeat it," she assured. The human just chuckled one more time before pushing backwards, floating on his back before he twisted, righting himself, and disappeared below the dark water. The occasional underwater crystals provided just enough lighting to watch the figure snake under the water towards the deeper end of the marble basin.

Luna watched as she made her way toward Celestia and Twilight. The human was a surprisingly good swimmer from what she could tell. He passed one of the underwater lights as he went through the water. Luna finally realized his only clothing was a pair of green shorts.

"What happened to his clothes?" Luna asked her sister, somewhat alarmed. Last time she caught the human nude he threw a bit of a fit ...and a boot.

"He took them off," Celestia answered plainly. "And 'Hello' to you too," Celestia added.

"What? When? In front of you?" Luna questioned, ignoring her last comment and earning a confused look from the elder alicorn.

"Yes. I was just showing him around, but he got rather excited when he saw the pool, I told him he was welcome to it, and next thing I know he was already in the water. He's rather quick when he wants to be," She mused, apparently just as confused by the situation as Luna. Celestia nodded toward a pile of digital clothing resting in an alcove on the wall. The armored vest propped against the wall next to his boots, where even more surprisingly he had relinquished his pistol and shotgun.

Luna huffed, annoyed at this duplicitous human standard for clothing etiquette but decided to save the issue for later nitpicking.

Twilight watched, diligently taking notes about how the creature maneuvered in the water. He appeared quite happy there. The revelation surprised the young unicorn. She had just assumed the creature was happiest on solid ground, like the majority of ponies. Not that ponies couldn't swim. Many could, in fact. But it wasn't exactly a graceful activity. Most were content to merely wade in the shallows. He however looked perfectly at home, even in the deeper end.

His head resurfaced by the edge where Celestia was dipping her hooves. He folded his arms on the edge and rested his chin, closing his eyes, content to float and enjoy the warm water. "I missed this," he sighed not bothering to open his eyes.

"What's that?" Celestia asked swirling her own hooves in the pool.

"Swimming," he murmured, "just... doing something normal again." He rolled his shoulders. "Feels good."

"I'm glad you're enjoying it," Celestia said honestly.

"So can all humans swim?" Twilight asked eagerly, quill and paper at the ready.

"Most, yeah. Some even do it competitively. Races and diving and such," he told her, his eyes still closed.

"Who taught you to swim?"

He thought for a moment. "I don't really remember..." he murmured, "I just kinda... do it,"

"Your pretty good at it," Twilight complimented.

"Marines are amphibious," he smiled.

"You're a mammal, actually," Twilight corrected, "It's a clade of endothermic amniotes, distinguishable from the other amniotes, birds, and reptiles by their neocortex, mammary glands, four-

chambered heart, and-" Twilight yelped as she felt a hand wrap around her hoof, only having enough time to let out a distressed cry before being pulled into the water by the grinning human, effectively silencing her lecture prematurely.

With a splash and a great commotion Twilight clambered back out of the pool, now soaking wet and glaring furiously at the perpetrating human, whose boisterous chuckling was only increasing her irritation.

Her horn flared to life and as she held the human's head under the surface for several vengeful seconds, enjoying the bubbles and surprised limb flailing much more than she should have.

He finally pushed against the wall of the pool with his feet, escaping the unicorn's magical aura. He resurfaced a few yards away safely away from the cloud of drowning purple magic, still chuckling indignantly.

Twilight huffed, trotting away from the edge and grabbing towel off a nearby stack as she began drying herself.

The human merely floated on his back, swishing his arms through the water and propelling himself in no particular direction.

"So explain to me how it's alright for you remove your clothing in front of Celestia and Twilight but find it necessary to throw a tantrum when it's in front of me," Luna complained, eager to flaunt the chip on her shoulder.

Shane grinned, opening one eye to inspect the irritated night princess. "Why are you jealous?"

"No but I'm a bit peeved that I'm the only one that gets large objects hurled at her head."

"I was in the shower," he said as if that were sufficient explanation.

"And now you are in a pool. I fail to see the significant distinction."

He stopped floating planting his feet on the bottom. He was still close enough to the shallow end that the water only reached about

his chest. "Yeah, but...it's different." He sounded genuinely confused that the alicorn did not understand the distinction.

"I don't see how," Luna continued to complain.

"Fine. Bring me a boot and I'll chuck it at your sister if that will make you feel better." He gestured with his hands toward the pile of clothes.

"What!?" Celestia cried, "What did I do?"

"Such a victory, though amusing, would not alleviate the heart of the issue," Luna answered.

Shane just massaged his temples. "Look just memorize this rule and you'll get along just fine. Try and stay with me here because it gets a little complicated... 'Bathroom - Private... Pool - Public.' You trackin'?"

"Yes, and there is no need to be patronizing. It is not our fault your species has an infuriatingly convoluted set of situationally dependant social taboos," Luna huffed.

"Well luckily for you I'm probably the first and last human you're ever going to encounter. So in the grand scheme any insult you give will be fairly short lived." He resumed his aimless floating. "Just knock from now on. That'll solve just about every potential problem."

Luna just rolled her eyes, but Celestia hid a small snicker behind one of her hooves. "Well I suppose that's settled. Come along, Major. Let us get something to eat. You're going to need your energy for tomorrow."

"What happens tomorrow?" He asked slowly correcting his directionless course to drift toward the alicorns.

"I've arranged for a few specialists to come assist in analyzing you. We need to know as much as we can about you before we can make any sort of public announcement concerning your arrival," Luna explained.

"You're still going through with that huh?" Shane asked pulling himself out of the water.

"What do you think we should do?" Luna asked incredulously.

"Lie," he said plainly, "Like a normal politician. Blame swamp gas or weather balloons, or another one of those generic cover-up nonsense stories." He walked back toward his clothes. Twilight winced as she saw the skin on above his hip peppered with small scars.

"I'm afraid our government is just a bit more transparent than yours," Celestia informed the human as she telekinetically plopped a towel over his dripping head.

He merely shrugged before scrubbing himself dry with the towel. "It's your throne," he sighed nonchalantly.

"Beside the point, there is someone new your meeting, tomorrow," Celestia warned, "And I need you to make a good impression. They have become quite an influential figure."

"Great," he panned, slowly getting dressed.

"Who is it, princess?" Twilight asked, surprised. She couldn't think of anyone in either Celestia's or Luna's court that might be influential in their plans this early in the game.

"Well I'd rather not ruin the surprise," Celestia said with her trademark benevolent smile. "But suffice it to say, I think it's somepony you'll be quite happy to see."

Twilight, now sufficiently dry, racked her brain of potential candidates, but try as she might she couldn't think of a single representative, senator, or delegate with sufficient clout to actually sway any legislation serious enough for the princesses to consider them significant.

"That's good, because I was just thinking, 'You know what this shitty mess needs? More surprises! I was almost worried things were going too smooth lately,'" Shane scoffed as he laced his boots.

“Your sarcastic input is duly noted, Major,” Celestia droned. “However it’s not just for Twilight. I also need you to make a good impression on this pony.”

“Why you gotta make it sound like I’m gonna be the one that messes it up.” He slipped his armored vest over his green skivvy shirt. “I’ll have you know I am charming as fuck when I wanna be,” Shane assured with a smile.

Luna chuckled at the claim, but Celestia just rolled her eyes. “Just stay with Luna tomorrow, and actually do what she says and you’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be fine?” he repeated cautiously. “What kind of analysis is this gonna be?”

“Relax, it’s nothing invasive,” Celestia promised, at the traces of fear in his tone.

“Yes, it’s a very small probe, you’ll hardly even notice,” Luna reassured.

For a brief moment the color drained from his face until he saw Luna suppressing the giggles. “That’s not funny,” he said seriously.

Luna failed to restrain her laughter, and she gigglsnorted a few times at the human’s expense.

“I swear to God. If anything comes near my ass, I will kill you, and everyone in this castle... slowly,” he warned, menacingly.

“Yes, yes, you’re very scary,” Luna replied in a tone normally reserved for puppies and small children.

“Simple physical and cognitive tests, Major, nothing more,” Celestia added, ignoring her sister’s un-princess-like behavior.

“I could have sworn I already demonstrated for you my distaste for medical personnel.” The human slung the massive firearm, and threw his un-donned blouse over his shoulder.

Celestia nodded in confirmation. “You never did explain why.”

Shane leaned against the rough stone wall folding his arms across his chest, choosing to simply ignore Celestia's question.

"I'll be there the whole time, not to worry," Luna explained.

"Just you and me?" Shane asked, his voice colored with an emotion she couldn't place.

"That was the idea. Is that alright?" Luna asked becoming serious for a brief moment. He was trying his best to conceal it, but a blind mare could see something about the subject was unnerving him. Maybe he was just genuinely afraid of doctors.

The human shrugged somewhat like a teenager when asked how school was that day. His eyes flicked over to Twilight so quickly a hummingbird could have easily missed it.

Luna decided it was worth investigating. Now she just had to try to be subtle with the maneuver. "On second thought," Luna offered. "Twilight, maybe you should tag along as well." Luna hid her smile as she caught the human's hopeful face out of the corner of her eye.

Twilight perked up at the mention of her name. "Really? You're sure you wouldn't mind, Princess?" Twilight beamed.

"Of course not. In fact I would love to have a second set of notes for comparison." Luna was telling the truth. Twilight's insight could be enormously helpful, even if it wasn't Luna's true motive behind her invitation.

"It would be my pleasure, princess," Twilight smiled.

~~~~~

The stallion snapped the latches on his luggage closed. After what seemed like hours of stuffing and struggling, the lid finally locked in place. He stepped back to admire the large brown case, pretending he didn't hear the overstressed hinges' groans of protest.

A shadow moved behind him. The stallion knew who it was before he turned around, but he did so anyway.

A soft pink alicorn stood in the doorway. Light from the hall behind her highlighted her silhouette. Long strands of pinks, purples, and yellows fell down her shoulders ending in natural curls by her legs. She rolled her downy wings to adjust the light blue satin robe tied loosely around her form.

The only flaw in the alicorn's obvious beauty was her miserable expression. A few errant strands of her long mane were awry. Her worried frown and pleading eyes bored into the stallion.

Her expression mirrored his feelings. He wasn't any fonder of leaving than she was. But he still gave her a reassuring smile. Or at least he tried to; it came out more like a humorless grin than anything.

She closed the distance between them, pressing her muzzle into his neck. He returned the gesture, pulling her closer while his free hoof gently stroked her soft mane as comfortably as he could.

"Shiny..." she murmured apprehensively.

"Shhh," he soothed, kissing the alicorn's neck affectionately. "You know we've talked about this. I've had to go away before, and you survived."

"Never like this," she protested. "It's never been this sudden or secretive. I know my Aunty, Shining, something is wrong."

"You're making assumptions."

"She addressed you as, Captain Shining Armor... Captain."

"...I am a captain, sweetheart."

"You're also her nephew now, Shiny. That wasn't the type of summons you send your nephew. It was a military order."

"Cadence we both knew this could happen before we got married." The alicorn pouted slightly. Shining Armor wrapped her in his hooves. "Cady, I love you more than anything. But I made a commitment to Equestria. And I will do anything to protect you, and our subjects. Even if you don't want me to." He nuzzled the top



of the alicorn's head fondly.

As much as she hated the situation she couldn't be mad at the stallion. It wasn't really his fault. But she couldn't shake the horrible feeling of dread surrounding the whole situation. Something was wrong in Equestria. She could feel it.

The stallion pulled his wife closer, rocking her comfortably. "Stop worrying, Cadence. I'm going to Canterlot, not the badlands, and the sooner I get there the sooner I can help Celestia with whatever she needs and get back to you."

Cadence smiled. "I know. It's probably nothing. This just feels different."

"Different isn't always bad," he noted optimistically, earning a light laugh from the alicorn. "There she is," he lifted her chin with his hoof, meeting her smile with his own. "I'll be back before you know it. Until then I'll write you every day."

Cadence sighed, "Well then I guess you better be off then. You have a long train ride ahead of you."

"I'll be there by tomorrow night. I send you a letter as soon as I get to the castle." He released the mare. She seemed a little better. "Just promise you won't dwell on it while I'm gone. You have enough on your plate already," the stallion teased.

"I promise," she sighed.

"Hay, if it turns out to be nothing maybe you'll be able to come join me for a little bit. You can see your aunts again, see my parents. It could be a fun little vacation."

The alicorn laughed at idea, "Only you could think a national emergency could turn into a nice little vacation."

Shining smiled and shrugged, "You never know. In fact, I'll bet this all nothing and she just needs me to help with some administrative nonsense. Having a Captain of the Guard so far away, I'm sure I've missed a bunch of things that I need to be updated on." Shining armor's horn began to glow a warm magenta as his luggage moved

across the room to settle on a wheeled cart.

He pecked his wife on the cheek one more time. "Everything's gonna be fine."

~~~~~

Shane stepped out of his cell, followed by a skinny trembling pegasus stallion wearing a lab coat and a stethoscope. A small clipboard was tucked under his wing.

The stallion looked like he was walking to the gallows. He stepped awkwardly as the human watched him like a hawk.

The young physician halted in front of the night princess, still trembling. He stood there for several seconds saying nothing. Luna cocked her head at the frozen stallion.

Shane frowned, poking the stallion in the head stiffly, causing the pony to jump slightly and begin to speak.

"M-Major Doran, is a prime example of healthiness," he recited haltingly. "As a medical professional I... I..." The stallion blanked.

"I see no reason..." Shane prompted when the stallion faltered.

"I s-s-see no reason to schedule any further medical testing, on the human," he concluded.

Luna turned to look at Shane with half-lidded, unamused eyes. "Really?" she deadpanned.

Shane shrugged. "...was worth a shot."

"These tests are happening whether you want them to or not." Luna chided.

"Yeah? You and what doctor?" the human challenged haughtily.

Luna was confused for a moment turning to see that the stallion had indeed fled. Luna's mouth hung open for a moment before she closed it. She composed herself. "I can have you chained down for

the remainder of this examination. Is that what you want? I'd really rather not, but don't think for a moment I won't."

"You are so cute when you're all mad," he said ignoring her threats and pinching the lunar diarch's cheek affectionately.

Luna quickly swatted his hand away. "I'm going to find that poor colt. Twilight, move him to a room where I can watch him. Luna commanded as she trotted in the direction of the fleeing stallion.

Twilight turned back on the human. Shane was still grinning at his little victory over the Equestrian health care system. His smile slowly melted when he saw Twilight's expression though.

She pointed at the ground. The human recognized the gesture. She always made him descend to her level before she yelled at him for something. He sighed and sat on his heels waiting for the verbal lashing.

It didn't come. Or at least not in any way he recognized. The little unicorn just fixed him with a doe eyed stare. "Shane, I know you're scared," she started simply. "But this is serious." He recoiled, mouth opening as if to say something in return but no words came out. Twilight laughed humorlessly. "I don't know if you noticed this, but we're in a bit of trouble here. You might think this is all redundant and unnecessary, or that were only doing this to irritate you. But this is important. Shane...we aren't the only ones around. The world needs to know about you. Equestria holds a comfortable position in the theater of nations, but we aren't untouchable. The more information we can give the world about you, the safer everyone will feel. If we go out there with nothing, not only will we will look incompetent and feel very silly, but everyone will assume that we aren't capable of dealing with this. And they might just try and take you away." His eyes narrowed angrily when she said it, but he stayed silent, waiting for the lavender mare to finish. "I don't want that. I don't think you do either. So please, please, let us do this." She prodded him on the arm, her eyes softening a little. "If nothing else, do it for me. I think you owe me a few favors anyway."

Shane clearly wasn't ready for the mare to lay it all out so suddenly.

He definitely wasn't prepared for such brutal honesty. He stared at the floor shuffling awkwardly for a moment, feeling rather small next to the unicorn despite his greater size. "Cut straight for the nuts, don'cha?"

"When I have to," she smiled a little.

"I'll be good," he murmured, sighing. "But you have to go with me. I don't want to be alone with doctors," he stipulated.

"I'll be there every step of the way."

"You promise?" he added a hint of tease reentering his voice.

"Pinkie promise," she swore.

Shane looked at the mare with suspicious amusement. "Pinkie promises be powerful things where I come from," he smiled.

"Oh it's a pretty big deal here too," she assured in return.

The human grinned and offered the mare his smallest finger.

Now it was Twilight's turn to look confused. "What are you doing?"

"A pinkie promise."

"I think something may have been lost in the translation," she chuckled, stepping back and going through the appropriate motions. "Cross my heart and hope to fly. Stick a cupcake in my eye," she added with a gentle poke to her (closed) eye. "That is a Pinkie Promise."

He laughed at the ritual but make any comment about it, "I guess that'll do."

"Then let's go!" a flash of violet magic yanked him to his feet and began to push him down the hall in search of a room with a window or two-way mirror. The doctor had agreed to meet them at Shane's cell, but Twilight was sure the prison would have an interrogation room or something where Luna could keep an eye on the human and the doctor could set up shop.

It didn't take long to find one. The directions of a watchful guard and a few hallways later Twilight sat in a plain white room with a steel table, two chairs and a large mirror in the wall. Shane made himself at home in one of the too-small chairs. He shed his armored vest, pulled the long knife from his its sheath and proceeded to clean his nails to pass the time.

Twilight wasn't sure how long it was going to take the princess to convince the doctor to return so she sat resigning herself to wait as well. The room had an annoying musty smell, as if it hadn't been used in a long while, so she pretended not to care when the human lit a cigarette.

~~~~~

Celestia approached her sister who was sitting on the dark side of a one way mirror, watching a beige unicorn mare wearing a pink nurse's outfit as she attempted to perform some cursory medical tests on an uncooperative human. He had shed his vest and desert blouse and was now sitting on the edge of the table, legs kicking in a childlike fashion.

Celestia sat next to her sister and watched for a moment, waiting for Luna to finish writing something in a thick notebook. It was actually rather entertaining to watch the nurse try and run her tests while Shane was fidgeting and touching the equipment, or removing thermometers too early. The mirrored glass screen blocked any sound from passing through so she was unable to tell what exactly was being said. Shane chatted something every now and then, usually to Twilight but he occasionally said something to the nurse. Though her questions seemed to be mostly, 'What are you doing?' or 'What is that?' both of which usually preceded 'Is this going to hurt?'.

The nurse stood next to the table with a small syringe, apparently one used to draw a blood sample. She wasn't getting very far as the human didn't sit still long enough for the nurse to find a vein much less stick the needle in one.

"It doesn't look like its going ...too badly," Celestia said with very few traces of genuine optimism.

“Well he hasn’t scared this one off yet,” Luna said with tired praise. “He’s actually behaving miraculously well, compared to earlier. I think Twilight may have had something to do with it.”

She returned her attention to the room. The nurse began drawing blood. Pushing the tip of a small needle into the hollow of his elbow, dark red liquid rushed down a thin clear tube into a plastic container marked with large biohazard labels. Celestia waited and watched. She knew he didn’t want to do this, but unfortunately he was going to have to get used to it. Today was just the first steps in a series of examinations. She would find a way to make it up to him later.

~~~~~

“You know I need that stuff to live right?” Shane mumbled to the nurse as she began to fill a second blood bag.

“Last one,” the beige unicorn promised.

He huffed as the crimson fluid slowly filled the plastic bag. “Why are you doing this now? All of this would have been much easier to do while I was unconscious.”

“You weren’t exactly the picture of health while you were unconscious,” Twilight reminded, not taking her eyes from her own notebook.

“We did what we could while you were under,” the nurse continued. “Unfortunately we were afraid to take any substantial samples. You had already lost so much blood. We learned what we could from sheer observation, but we were in completely uncharted territory with you. Early on we had to make due with conjecture and theoretics. But at times we could only guess and pray. You’re very lucky to be alive.”

“So I’ve been told,” he said distractedly poking the squishy plastic blood bag as it filled. The nurse gave him a stern look and moved it out of his reach. “So you were one of my doctors then?” he continued unfazed.

"I'm a nurse practitioner. Not a doctor. But yes, I was on the medical team that got tasked with you."

"Oh," he paused. "Hey, did I ever hit you in the head with an oxygen tank?"

Despite the horridly blunt question, the nurse smiled. "No, that was my boss. Although I have heard we look a bit alike."

"Yeah... Is she still alive?"

This time the nurse cocked her head smirking at the question. "Of course. Why?"

"I don't know. I whacked her pretty fuckin hard," he said somewhat sheepishly. "I do feel bad about that," He assured, scratched his chin in contemplation. "I should probably send her flowers or like... a card or something." He turned to Twilight. "Do you know any stores that sell unusually specific apology cards?"

"I don't think your going to find a 'Sorry for whacking you with an oxygen tank' apology card," Twilight shot down, over the brim of her notes.

"Not with that attitude..." he said frowning.

"Pssst," the nurse beckoned him closer. "She likes Lilies."

His twisted around, snapping his fingers at Twilight a few times. "Sparky, make it happen."

"What? Why me?"

"Because I'm not allowed to walk into town to buy shit," he said simply. "Unless you wanna convince your mom to let me out of the yard for once."

Twilight rolled her eyes, "Princess Celestia isn't my mom," she informed flatly. "And she's probably watching you now so you might want to watch what you say." Despite the warning Twilight smiled.

“You think so?” he asked seeming oddly happy about the prospect as he glared into the mirror with a crooked grin. He raised an upturned fist toward the reflective glass curling all but his middle finger, and making contemptuous kissing face.

~~~~~

“What is the meaning of that gesture?” Luna asked quizzically peering through the portal.

“I don’t know, Luna. I seem to have left the Big Book of Human Hand Signals in my chambers,” she answered teasingly.

Luna scoffed, “Do you think it was directed at us?”

“I’m sure he knows we’re watching. I doubt the trans-dimensional being from a race of technologically advanced aliens is going to be confused by the concept of mirrored glass,” Celestia answered flatly.

“We will ask him later,” Luna dismissed continuing her scribbling. “How was your court?”

“I spent the large part of it putting out fires amongst the castle staff. They know something is up, Luna. They’re not stupid. Almost the entire guard knows by now, and I can assure you they’re lips won’t stay sealed for long. Guards gossip to the wait staff, the wait staff go home and gossip to their loved ones.” Celestia trailed off.

“We don’t need long,” Luna said, looking up from her notes purposefully. “A few more days, maybe a week and we should have collected everything we need.”

“That might not be soon enough,” Celestia warned gaining Luna’s attention. “Magneus wrote you back this morning. He was apparently quite ecstatic upon receiving your invitation. He intends to arrive in a few days time.”

“You opened my mail?”

“You were busy!” Celestia defended.

Luna contemplated the new information. She had not anticipated



the Griffon's promptness, but it would not require them to deviate from their current plan. "Although a bit unexpected it should cause no trouble for us. We shall continue on schedule."

The moon princess returned her attention to the room opposite the mirror. The nurse wrapped a purple bandage on the hollow of the humans elbow before smiling patting him on the leg encouragingly and fishing a baggy of lollipops from her satchel. She levitated them to the human who took it, tentatively holding the baggy of sweets and looking thoroughly confused as if unsure what to do with it.

~~~~~

"Is this part of the test?" he asked looking between Twilight and the nurse, still clutching the bag of sweets.

"They're lollipops, Major," Twilight laughed. "A piece of candy on a stick."

"I know what a lollipop is!" he sneered.

"Is it alright if he has one? I'm sorry. I probably should have asked first," the nurse questioned apologetically. The human's eyes narrowed at the fact that the nurse was going over his head to gain permission from Twilight rather than himself.

"Oh no you're fine," Twilight assured. "But I think he might just be a little old for that."

He twisted to throw a betrayed glare at the purple unicorn. "Shut uuuup!" he tried to whisper before she robbed him of his chance at candy.

"Fine," she rolled her eyes. "But only take one."

Shane selected one with a wrapper depicting tiny watermelons. Clutching his prize and handing the baggy back to the nurse somewhat regrettably.

Twilight returned to her notes, and the nurse took advantage of the distraction to sneak the human a hoof full of candies. He covertly glanced back at Twilight before stuffing them in his cargo pocket.

The nurse winked secretively and the human expressed his gratitude by affectionately scratching the nurse behind the ear, causing her to melt for a moment and her rear leg to twitch involuntarily.

She snapped back to reality the moment he stopped, blushing through her coat, and coughing embarrassedly. She muttered an apology as she started gathering up her supplies and placing them back in the satchel. Shane just smiled obliviously, preoccupied as he was with his treats.

~~~~~

“Well...” Celestia started grinning, “He warmed up to her pretty quickly.”

“I’m telling you, it’s just like when you get a new puppy and you start introducing it to strangers and you give them a biscuit to give to the dog? The same rules apply. We just need to start carrying around sweets and those little tiny bottles of liquor you get on airships and have ponies introduce themselves by offering him one. Instant good start,” Luna declared assuredly, clicking a hoof for emphasis

“I think he might start to catch on.” Celestia giggled at the idea.

“Never know until we try,” Luna grinned in return.

The beige nurse placed a stack of papers into a yellow folder, handing them to Twilight with a friendly smile. The papers were most likely the nurses own observations throughout the physical.

Luna did not really expect the folder to contain any new information, but a second opinion never hurt anypony. This whole check-up was mostly just the preamble to more in-depth exams.

The nurse said something as she picked up her satchel. The human hopped off the table happily, lollipop in mouth, and hastily grabbed his gun and tugged on his armor. Luna saw the screen on his plated pauldrons flicker to life, flashing green before he covered the screen with a flap. Luna wondered at the fact that the little machine had

probably done in two brief seconds what took one of their medical professionals over an hour.

A strident tapping shook Luna from her thoughts as she noticed the human knocking against the glass, before mouthing ‘Open the door’ and pointing at the portal with his lollipop. ‘She says I’m done’, he added pointing at the nurse. He pressed his forehead against the glass, trying to block the ambient light with his hand, as he attempted to peer through the mirrored frame. His blue eyes glanced over the alicorns, but he saw only his own reflection. ‘I would like to leave here now, please,’ he mouthed, frowning impatiently. The vibrations of his voice barely carried through the glass.

Celestia looked at a clock on the wall. Before rising to her hooves and heading toward the exit. “I’m going to send Twilight to the courtyard to meet Shining Armor, if you’d like to go with her. He should be arriving from the Crystal Empire soon. I wanted to surprise her.”

“I’m sure she’ll be thrilled,” Luna said distractedly. “Once we bring the good Captain up to speed, he should be able to explain everything to Cadence. She may even want to come have a look for herself. Either way she should be able to make preparations in the Crystal Empire before we schedule any press release.”

“That was the idea,” Celestia nodded. “I wouldn’t want to spring that kind of announcement on her without any warning. If you want you can go with Twilight. I’m going to take Shane and go get some dinner. I had to skip lunch during court,” she explained unhappily, as her horn glowed and twisted the knob on the interrogation room door. “We will meet you right after.”

Shane spilled out of the room like it was running out of oxygen. He let out a long happy growling sound as he stretched in the hallway. It made Celestia giggle softly. It was the same feeling she had when she retired from her throne at night.

“See? You survived. Does it not go more smoothly when you cooperate?” Luna asked teasingly.

He fixed the lunar princess with a flat stare and bit through the lollipop in his teeth as if that were a proper response. He began walking down the hall toward his cell, still crunching on the sugary shards.

Luna didn't bother chasing after him. He was probably just going back to his room. Even if he wasn't the guards would keep him in the building. Twilight stepped into the hall, eyes already scanning the yellow folder.

"Anything particularly interesting, Twilight Sparkle?" Celestia asked.

"I'm afraid not princess," she answered, her eyes still flitting back and forth through the documents. "Height, weight, general descriptions, pretty standard stuff. Not much we didn't already know." Twilight rattled off the a few more headings. "His blood work will be back tomorrow evening." She paused with a confused look. "Strange," she commented quietly. "She left the dental section blank." Twilight flipped the paper to see if it were merely written on the back.

"It doesn't matter," Luna dismissed. "He has plenty more appointments with zoologists, dietitians, doctors, and the like. I am sure somepony will check his teeth."

Twilight nodded, handing the folder to the princess, who tucked it under an indigo wing and set off down the hallway with her sister, Twilight Sparkle followed along dutifully.

Celestia frowned as they passed his cell only to discover it empty. They found him out front, sitting on the stairs and talking to the two door sentries. Cigarette in mouth, he kept flicking the silver lighter, attempting to spark a flame. And after ensuring neither of the guards 'had a light' he stood, reaching up to one of the torches mounted along the side of the wall. He pulled himself up with his arms sticking his face by the dancing tongue of flame, and puffing on the cigarette expectantly.

He pulled away only to find his cigarette still unlit. Celestia waited with an amused face, content to let the human figure it out for

himself. Clearly confused he stuck the tip back into the flame only to receive the same result. He decided to up the ante by placing his entire face into the fire. Luna audibly smacked her hoof to her forehead, despite the human pulling his unharmed head out of the blaze.

He dropped back down to the ground, scratching his head. He noticed the alicorns standing at the entrance giving him judgmental looks. He pointed back up at the mounted torch. "...Your fire is broken," he told them, in a still perplexed voice.

"It's a heatless torch, Major," Celestia explained. "Magic. Not real fire."

"Oh," he said quietly, unsure whether to be impressed or disappointed.

"At what point in that little journey of discovery, did you decide to test if the fire was hot, and think that the best way to do that... was with your face?" Luna asked sounding genuinely mystified by the logic.

"It was at the point roughly somewhere between shut up and I do what I want," he responded sharply.

"Enough," Celestia moaned tiredly. "Luna, be nice. Shane, fire is hot," she settled quickly. "Now, Twilight, go with Luna. I'm having a chariot pick up a guest at the train station and I want you there to greet them when they arrive." Twilight nodded obediently. "Shane, you're coming with me. We're getting something to eat then joining them. I'll make introductions later."

Luna turned to the young purple unicorn. "Come, Twilight Sparkle. It is better to be early than late." Twilight smiled excitedly, following the lunar princess down the steps and across the courtyard.

Shane merely contemplated his lifeless cigarette, before dejectedly replacing it back in the small red box. He sighed and gestured with his arm for the alicorn to take the lead.

He followed along beside the princess as she navigated the halls of the castle. His longer legs allowed him to keep pace with her gait. She would normally have to slow herself so that ponies would not have to run to keep up. It was also quite nice not having to look down to hold a conversation for once. Being an alicorn in a world of ponies was a bit estranging at times. As irritating as he was, she had to admit she enjoyed his company. It was oddly comforting having an unbiased party to talk to, especially one on eye level.

“This castle is a fucking nightmare,” he said frowning at the walls, and ruining the moment. “How do you get around this place? Everything looks the same.”

“I’ve been living here awhile,” she answered plainly.

“I lived in my house while too, and I still got confused by which light switch went to what,” he pointed out chuckling slightly.

~~~~~

The train car jostled slightly, stirring Shinning Armor from his sleep. He cracked his eyes, and lazily peered about the nearly empty cabin. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and massaged his neck, attempting to work the kinks out of his spine. The window of a moving train proved to be a rather uncomfortable pillow.

The sun was almost down. He squinted into the setting sun, and surely enough the tall mountain city could be seen in the distance. Still a bit away, but he should arrive in less than an hour.

He rested his head back against the glass pane, once again closing his eyes. His lips turned up into a smile. He loved the Crystal Empire with all his heart, but Canterlot would always be his home. And it felt good to be back.

~~~~~

“Bacon,” The human annunciated slowly to the perplexed servant. “Baaaacooooon... Strips of pork fried in a pan? Bacon?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I-”

“Bay–Kuhn. Bacon,” he repeated.

“She doesn’t know what bacon is, Major,” Celestia interrupted tiredly. The solar princess hadn’t eaten all day and didn’t feel like waiting for the human to detail his carnivorous palette to the servant mare. “You’re just going to have to pick something else to eat.”

Shane huffed. He leaned down by the servant mare. “She isn’t very nice is she?”

Celestia rolled her eyes at the human who proceeded to place a seemingly simple order of eggs, toast, hash browns, and ‘the largest container of beer she could physically carry’.

Celestia allowed the order to go unchallenged. Not even bothering to question why he was ordering breakfast foods at dinner time. She eagerly placed her own request and watched as the servant scurried away to prepare their orders.

She returned her attention to the human who was unabashedly ogling the princess’s pragmatic flowing mane. She let him. It gave her a moment to think of something to talk about.

“How are you feeling, Major?”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m fine. You have pretty hair. Very hypnotic. Like watching a lava lamp.”

Celestia wasn’t sure how to take the sudden compliment, but she smiled all the same. “Thank you,” she chuckled. “But I was referring to how your examinations went today.”

He shrugged noncommittally. “Alright, I guess. I’m not going to pretend I enjoy them, but it’s not like I’ve got something better to do,” he admitted almost sadly.

“I do appreciate your help, Shane,” she said genuinely. “It may not mean much to you but this is possibly one of the biggest milestones in equine history to date.”

“Glad I can help,” he said, sounding anything but.

“Are you nervous?”

“Given that I’m going to be thrust under the microscope of a planet’s worth of scientists, I think I’m handing it fairly well.”

“Oh don’t act like it’s a death sentence.”

“No. I could handle a death sentence. Death is easy. This is a different monster entirely.”

“You’re a grim one,” she noted casually.

“The world is grim, princess. I’m just uniquely capable of embracing it for what it is.” He smiled. She couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

She opened her mouth to respond when a low rumble from her stomach interrupted her. “I apologize,” she excused herself blushing slightly.

“Hungry?” he asked as he rested his head against a fist, smiling somewhat teasingly.

“I haven’t eaten yet today,” she explained.

“Why?” he cocked an eyebrow, grinning as if expecting her to deliver the punch line of some kind of joke.

“I was busy,” Celestia answered just as simply.

“Doing princess stuff?” he still grinned like a hyena.

“Yes, Major. Running a country is a lot of work.”

He hummed, leaning back in his chair. “I wouldn’t know. It seems like you would have people to do all the boring jobs. Delegate some shit. Isn’t that what princesses do?”

“I do have ponies for that. In fact I’ve spent a very long time ensuring Equestria’s government is capable of operating completely on its own. My advisors are able to issue orders in my stead. They then flow down through various Ministries and senates, eventually



reaching local governments.” She explained the structure of government as simply as she could. “It’s actually a very effective system.”

“So if it’s so self-sufficient then what’s the point of keeping you around?”

“Luna and I act as the final and highest point in the structure. When issues arise, they work their way up the levels of government until they are solved, or routed to the proper ministry. Besides our regular duties, often specialized issues which require our input, approval, or insight, make it to our desk.”

“But they don’t really need you,” he noted with air-quotes. “Let’s say one day they come to you and are like... ‘Okay, we’re tired of the whole princesses’ thing. We want to try democracy now’.”

“Then I would happily abdicate my throne. If it were best path for my little ponies then I would be the first to suggest it. And I would do whatever I could to help it flourish.” The alicorn spoke with unquestionable honesty.

Shane regarded her with contemplative eyes for several drawn out seconds. “You’re weird,” he finally decided. He leaned back lacing his fingers behind his head and running his hands through his short hair.

“How does that make me weird?” she asked, slight self-consciousness in her tone.

“I don’t know...” he shrugged. “I just don’t get you. I don’t understand your motives. You confuse me. You’re weird.”

“I am not weird,” she huffed.

“You’re a little weird,” he insisted.

“Well luckily my self image is not dependant on your validation. I am quite satisfied with my world view.”

“Well....keep it up then,” he shrugged grinning.

“I will,” she assured.

“Good.”

“I’m glad we agree.”

“So am I.”

They each continued for several second. Neither content to let the other have the final word when they were interrupted by a servant pushing a cart laden with foods of every kind. The mere smell of which was making Celestia salivate, and from the disconcerting way the human licked his teeth, he was looking forward to the meal as well.

Celestia shifted eagerly in her seat as her food was placed before her. Only looking up when she heard the human let out a rather girlishly excited squeak when the mare placed a tankard of amber beer nearly the size of his head down.

Celestia wasted no time digging into her food. She was fairly certain the human wouldn’t mind. He wasn’t type to stand on ceremony. It was a pasta dish. Those shell shaped ones she couldn’t remember the name of, but they were filled with three kinds of cheese and covered in some type of red sauce that completely made up for her frustration at forgetting their name.

She sipped at a crystal glass of water, peering over the edge at the human who was taking an impressive go at the tankard. She set her glass down as he continued to guzzle away. “Shane,” she tried to get his attention.

He held up a finger in a ‘wait’ gesture as he continued to drink.

“Shane!”

He finally set the beverage down. “Yes, dear?”

Celestia ignored the cheek. “Slow down. You just had a sizable amount of blood drawn. You probably shouldn’t be drinking at all.”

He gave her a look that implied he found the prospect absurd

beyond measure, but didn't voice anything protests. He ate his breakfast/dinner quietly as she asked and ceasing the gulping in favor of moderate sipping. He licked his teeth after each one, smiling contentedly.

Celestia couldn't help but chuckle lightly at his expressions. "Are you happy now?"

He nodded. "Say what you will about ponies," he started. "Odd social practices and questionable taste in interior design aside, you have excellent booze." He nodded appreciatively.

"Thank you." Celestia said proudly disregarding the remark about her décor.

"What is this anyway?" he peered into the swirling amber liquid.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't be the one to ask. I never had taste for beer. Luna would know better than I would." She continued to nibble at her meal.

Shane scrutinized the snow white alicorn with a judgmental smile for several seconds. "Yeah. You don't look like a beer person," he agreed. "I'll bet you're a tequila girl," he nodded to himself. "You look like a tequila girl."

Celestia had to clasp a hoof to her mouth to keep herself from laughing. She could honestly say she had never heard that before. She swallowed, laughing aloud now that her mouth was empty.

The human grinned at the alicorn's amusement. "See? The laughing means I'm right," he declared confidently. "I would pay money to see you trash a margarita." He leaned back lacing his fingers behind his head, nodding. "In another life, I totally would have taken you south of the border."

"In another life, I may have taken you up on it." she said wiping a tear from her eye as the last remaining chuckles subsided.

Shane went back to his food, making rather short work of his breakfast/dinner and returning to his massive tankard.

Celestia watched as she polished off her own meal. She frowned and lit her horn, a cloud of radiant solar magic pulled the beverage away from the humans lips, setting it securely back on the table. "Slow down," the alicorn repeated sternly. "It's not going anywhere. How can you even drink like that?"

"I'm troubled." He frowned right back, swatting a hand at the cloud of magic, attempting to dissipate the aura and free his drink.

"And being an alcoholic alleviates that?"

He paused looking very offended. "I am not an alcoholic."

"Oh good," she chimed happily. "Then this shouldn't bother you." She tipped the tankard over, spilling the foamy amber beverage across the table.

The cry of alarm from the human was more than reward enough for Celestia. The human lunging in an attempt to save the liquid was just the icing on the cake that was her point.

Shane furrowed his brow at the pool of spilled beer. He began to shake his head disapprovingly. "Bad player," he admonished quietly. "Bad fuckin' player." He reached out and reverently righted the downed tankard. "You can forget about our trip to Mexico now."

Celestia merely smiled at having her moment. "I'll make it up to you later. We have to go meet Twilight and my sister." She stood, waiting for Shane to do the same.

He sat and stared at the pool of beer for a few more sad seconds before pushing away from the table. He grumpily grabbed the barrel of his shotgun, dragging the heavy weapon along as he trudged after the alicorn.

~~~~~

Twilight suppressed a yawn. Sitting and waiting for a carriage was about as exciting as it sounded. Needless to say, not very.

The unicorn looked to the princess at her side. Luna showed no

outward signs of annoyance or boredom. Twilight couldn't help but admire the dark alicorn's patience. She shuffled in place, attempting to find a more comfortable position on the grass.

Another minute ticked by. Twilight had enough, letting out an aggravated groan. "Will you at least give me a hint?" she begged the dark princess.

"Nay," Luna smiled knowingly.

"Well will they at least get here soon?"

"He is due any moment," Luna promised.

"AHA! So it's a he!" Twilight declared victoriously wiping the smirk off the alicorn's muzzle.

"Blast," she swore under her breath. "Enjoy it Twilight Sparkle. For you shall wrest no more from us." Luna stuck her nose in the air. "If you insist on continuing this guessing you shall only succeed in ruining the surprise."

Twilight was busy eliminating a fair number of the potential officials in her head.

Luna looked at the sky, squinting slightly at the setting sun. "At this rate Celestia and the Major may actually reach us before our guest arrives."

Twilight 'ooh'ed excitedly as a carriage approached the palace led by a pair of royal guards. "Is that it?"

Luna scrutinized the oncoming carriage. "I believe so. Yes," she announced.

The carriage bounced up the path at a steady pace soon passing through the marble archways and into the courtyard.

The guard stallions halted the carriage an appropriately suspenseful distance. The door opening a split second later as the mystery guest disembarked.

“Shiney?!” Twilight beamed.

“Twily!” the stallion echoed back enthusiastically.

The painful obviousness of the surprise washed over her like cool water. It had been months since she had seen her brother. He and Cadence had been so busy running the Crystal Empire they hadn’t had an opportunity to visit.

Twilight raced to greet her older brother. Who trotted to meet her in the middle. Shining armor being about twice the size of his younger sibling, easily scooped the smaller unicorn into a massive bear hug, standing on his hind legs to more effectively squeeze the life out of her.

“I didn’t expect you to be here!” Shining Armor said in his stupid surfer voice.

“You didn’t expect me!?” she mimicked. “I didn’t even know you were coming! Why didn’t you write?”

“I didn’t even know I was coming myself,” he laughed, setting his sister back on the ground. “I only just got the letter last night. I’ve been on a train all day,” he excused.

“I still haven’t heard from you or Cadence in weeks,” the purple unicorn nagged, poking Shining Armor in the chest. “Are you too busy being a prince to send a letter to your own sister?”

He laughed brushing away the prodding purple hoof. “I know. I’m sorry. But running an empire takes a lot of work. Besides, you’re a big girl now Twily. You don’t need me hovering over you anymore.” He ruffled her purple mane affectionately

“I know that,” she asserted pushing her mane back into place. “It would still be nice to hear from you every now and then.”

“Aw, I missed you too, Twily. And,” he leaned closer, “you know who else missed you?”

Twilight appeared confused for only a moment before a look of terror overtook her. “Shining Armor, don’t you dare.”

The stallion jerked his head around in twisted ways, mocking several painful retching sounds despite the obvious grin on his face. “Twily, run it’s...”

“Shining Armor, I swear to Celestia. I am serious.”

“It’s..the...the...”

Twilight looked ready to bolt. “Shiney! Don’t! I am an adult!”

“TICKLE MONSTER!” The stallion launched himself at the purple mare, tackling her in a tangle of limbs.

“NOOOOO!” she screamed in protest. Some things about having older sibling never changed.

Shining held Twilight down while his horn lit with a magenta glow, causing the mare to erupt in a fit of giggles. Twilight never managed to win against her brother’s barrage of tickle attacks. She recalled them being the bane of her young existence. Shining Armor on the other hoof found it amusing to no end.

Twilight’s sides began to get sore as the tickling continued with no end in sight. Tears collected in her eyes, while the laughter erupted from her in obnoxious squeals.

A distant shouting distracted Shining Armor from his assault. He looked up just in time to see a massive figure smash something heavy into his face, pain erupting everywhere.

~~~~~

Shane padded out into the light following the alicorn closely. He seemed happy to be out in the open again. He pulled a cigarette from his box, having to shake his silver lighter vigorously before a flame finally appeared.

“You should really quit that,” Princess Celestia admonished frowning. “It’s terrible for your health.”

“Thanks, Mom,” he droned puffing on the cigarette.

Celestia rolled her eyes at the stubborn creature but did not otherwise force the matter. The solar princess eyed the skies critically as she walked. "We might actually make it before he arrives. That didn't take as long as I'd imagined it would."

"Probably because someone didn't let me finish my drink," Shane mumbled.

"What was that?"

"Oh nothing," he assured dragging on the slender stick in his fingers.

Celestia ignored him, approaching the courtyard gates. "Now before he gets here there are some things we should go over," she began as they passed under the marble arches. "Firstly-"

A loud obnoxious screaming interrupted the princess. She recognized her own students high pitched laughing. She smiled as she saw the siblings playing. "That's Prince Shining Armor of the Crystal ...Shane?" The alicorn noticed the patch of grass next to her was occupied only by a smoldering discarded cigarette.

She looked over to see the human stalking toward the pair of unicorns with a look of malice she rarely saw in any creature.

Celestia began to put the pieces together in her head when she saw the human pull the massive twelve gauge from his back. "MAJOR!" she called hoping to stop the human.

Shining Armor looked up just in time for the human to crack him across the face with the buttstock of the heavy weapon. Celestia winced at the sound. The human grabbed the limp stallion by the mane, and forcibly dragged him off the still dazed Twilight.

Shining Armor tried to lift his head from the ground in a vain attempt to figure out what was happening, only to have the human drive his boot heel down into the stallions cheek, forcing it back to the ground.

Celestia and Luna both moving, preparing to subdue the human. Shane racked the shotgun ominously, and pressed the barrel to the



captain's temple.

The stallion's horn began to glow threateningly causing the human to jam the barrel into Shining Armors face.

"Unless you want me to show you what color your brains are, I suggest you shut off the horn," he finally spoke, voice dripping with poorly contained hatred.

"STOP!" Twilight had recovered enough to realize what had happened. "Stop right now!" The human gave her a puzzled look but didn't move. "Shane," her tone became as soothing as she could manage under the circumstances.

Shane only looked more confused by the unicorn. He looked around, suddenly noticing no less than six spears leveled at his torso, held aloft by six angry looking royal guards, and two alicorns, horns aglow and apparently ready to do battle.

He turned back to Twilight, Shining Armor's head still pinned under the heavy barrel of a loaded shotgun. He contemplated a moment. "...why are they all pointing those things at ME?" he asked cautiously puzzling it out.

"Because THAT is my brother," she explained. "And you just attacked him."

"Unprovoked I might add," Shining said through his squished face.

"Shut up!" the human ground his heel into Shining's cheek. "You don't talk."

"Major," Celestia began slowly approaching. "Please release Shining Armor."

Shane eyed the alicorn curiously for a few moments, clearly deciding in his head whether or not to do as she asked. He looked down at the stallion under his boot. He menacingly pointed two fingers at his eyes, then at Shining Armor. His message was pretty clear.

Shane removed his boot from the stallions face. He lowered the shotgun, and stepped away warily stepping backward toward

Celestia, clearly still ready to blast the poor stallion should it become necessary.

The guards lowered their spears and Twilight approached her brother. She checked to make sure he wasn't too seriously injured. He was going to have a few lumps on his head and maybe a black eye, but nothing too serious. "THAT'S what you get for tickle monsterring me!"

"Tickle monsterring?" Shane repeated slowly. "You were screaming because you were being TICKLED!?"

Twilight nodded embarrassedly.

"This whole planet is fucking stupid," Shane decided finally.

"What they HAY is going on!?" Shining Armor demanded from where he was still laying on the ground holding his head.

"Captain," Princess Celestia began. "This is Major Doran." Shining Armor raised his head to get a decent view of the tall angry bipedal creature.

"He is an alien," Luna added nonchalantly.

Shining Armor's eyes flicked back and forth between Luna and the biped, waiting for somepony to add, 'just kidding'. Without anything to really say he just went with the most obvious.

"....What?!"

# ARTICLE 2 Part XV

## ARTICLE 2

### PART XV

“Skip,” Shane said distastefully, indicating his disapproval for whatever song was playing on through the shared ear buds.

“Noo I like this one!” Pinkie protested stiff-arming the human to keep the device out of reach. She scooted over on the cot and bobbed her head enthusiastically to the upbeat tones coming from the blue bud in her ear.

Shane rolled his eyes, but didn’t otherwise argue with the pink pony sharing his cot, choosing instead to remove the bud from his own ear and let the bubbly mare have her moment. He pushed his own bud into Pinkie’s free ear. She didn’t even seem to notice as she swayed and danced in place to the human’s music device.

Luna sat with a pair of small complicated machines at her hooves, poking the strange things experimentally. They were half circles of flexible plastic, ended with a cushioned pad and a short swiveling appendage made of the same material. “Major? What are these devices?”

“Radios,” Shane answered dully. “You use them to talk to people.”

Luna looked slightly confused but to curiously prod.

Shane looked down at Twilight who was still sitting on the padded floor of Shane’s cell, eyeing the human with an irritated expectant look.

“What?” Shane asked.

“Don’t what me,” she scolded, “You know why I’m mad.”

“I’m not apologizing for that,” he defiantly insisted. “It’s really your fault anyway.”

“MY FAULT?! You attacked my brother!”

“I thought I was helping! You’re welcome by the way,” he replied hotly.

“He was only playing!”

“I didn’t know that! You were screaming.”

“I was laughing,” she corrected.

“It’s not my fault you laugh like panicky rape victim.”

Twilight huffed but didn’t otherwise protest further. If she were to be perfectly honest she wasn’t really mad at him for hitting Shining Armor. Although she wasn’t happy about it he was trying to help her, and for that she was strangely flattered. What she was mad at was the fact that he refused to apologize.

“All I’m asking is that you say you’re sorry for a misunderstanding. Stop being so stubborn,” she restated.

“Fine! I’m sorry for my totally justified and understandable reaction to a misinterpretation of pony greetings.”

“Understandable?! How was that a ‘justified misinterpretation’? You broke his nose!”

“First of all I didn’t break his nose, and excuse me, I didn’t know screaming and dry humping was the traditional way for ponies to say hello to their siblings!”

“It’s not!” she asserted resolutely.

“So you admit I’m right.”

“No!” she countered, well beyond the point of frustration. “I admit that while it may have been somewhat unorthodox and childish of Shining Armor, you were still wrong for jumping to ridiculous conclusions, attacking my brother, and still need to apologize.”

“I did!”

“A sincere apology, not a sarcastic one. And not to me but Shining Armor.”

“I’m not apologizing to him,”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like him,” he said crossing his arms resolutely.

“You don’t even know him!”

“I can tell from his face,” he assured, the corner of his lip curling slightly. “I’m not gonna like him.”

Twilight groaned, gently massaging her temples with her hooves. “You are the opposite of friendship,” she concluded.

The human cocked his head, as if trying to decide how serious an accusation that was on this planet. He was interrupted by the pink earth pony bumping into him as her dancing became increasingly enthusiastic. The synthetic music was now loud enough to be heard despite being firmly lodged inside Pinkie Pie’s fluffy pink head.

Twilight considered telling her to turn the volume down before she did any permanent damage to her eardrums. Shane just frowned at the pony for hijacking his toy, and scooted further down on the cot.

~~~~~

A jumble of flashy looking magazines landed roughly across Celestia’s desk.

“We have a problem,” Aegis said equal parts dread and exhaustion inflecting his voice. He collapsed onto the sitting cushions in her office, rubbing his eyes miserably.

Celestia removed her small gold rimmed glasses and lifted a magazine with a raised eyebrow. It was one of those magazines you’d see in line at the market, lots of ridiculous articles and hit-and-miss celebrity gossip. The kind of thing you’d pick up solely because you wanted something to look at while you waited in line.

This one was emblazoned with electric yellow letters, and a cover photo that made the princesses stomach drop. It was somewhat blurry and not the most flattering angle, the cynical part of her mind noted, but it was clear enough to plainly tell it was her in the photo. She was walking down the dimly lit streets of Canterlot with her sister and the human, accompanied by the elements of harmony and a number of royal guards.

She would be lying if she said it wasn't a well timed photo. The party looked unforgivably suspicious. Running around under the cover of darkness with an intimidatingly strange creature like Shane.

Canterlot was not unacquainted with visiting dignitaries or tourists from far off lands, but even a simpleton would notice this was something out of the ordinary.

No mere diplomat or vacationing individual would merit such royal attention or unwarranted secrecy. She finally got around to reading the headlines.

CANTERLOT EXCLUSIVE

THE PRINCESS' PET PROJECT

WHAT THE CROWN ISN'T TELLING YOU!

It was just vague enough to warrant curiosity. She doubted they actually knew anything. She didn't even have to read the article to know it would be filled with a lot of accusatory questions and panic inducing conjecture. She flipped to the indicated page anyway. It would be an entertaining read with no real evidence apart from an incriminating photograph. And ponies would eat it up.

"When was this released?" she asked as she scanned the words.

"It's going out tomorrow," he answered gravely. "One of my lieutenants has a brother in the press. We're just lucky some journalist couldn't keep his mouth shut. We just as well may have had no warning at all."

"I'd hardly credit this by calling it journalism," Celestia noted

coldly. “Is it too late to stop it?”

“Would you want to?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

Celestia knew it as well. In all reality she probably could have the article stopped before it hit the shelves, but to do so would also validate all the ridiculous conspiracy behind it. The roots of this nightmare had already taken hold. To rip them out now would only do more damage than it would prevent.

“I think we should count ourselves lucky that whoever our anonymous photographer is didn’t take their pictures to a more credible news source.”

“So what are we going to do?” the stallion asked impatiently.

“Nothing,” Celestia said dismissively setting the magazine aside and levitating her glasses back onto her nose.

“Nothing?” he repeated skeptically.

“Nothing,” she reaffirmed. “We offer no comment whatsoever. I doubt many ponies will take it seriously to begin with. There are countless excuses or cover stories that would nicely cover our actions but we can’t come up with a cover story this close to going public with the incident only to admit it was a lie a short time later and immediately lose all our credibility in one swoop.”

“Very well,” the older stallion replied with finality, clearly biting his tongue.

“Do you disagree, Commander?” Celestia prompted.

“No, your highness. I am merely unaccustomed to the sit and wait approach to dealing with problems.”

Celestia smiled understandingly. “I admit I am not fond of the choice either. But it is the right one. Our plan is passed the point where this little inconvenience can do any serious damage. The ponies of Equestria will know the truth soon enough, maybe this will even warm them up to the idea that an extra terrestrial is now residing in their midst.” She returned to scanning the piles of scrolls

on her desk.

Aegis rose from his seat. “Will that be all then, Princess?”

“Please have one of my attendants send for Luna. She’ll want to know about this.”

Aegis nodded compliantly as he bowed to the alicorn, turning towards the door and seeing himself out.

~~~~~

The lunar princess landed on a parapet. She tapped the microphone on the headset that sat neatly by the corner of her mouth, before depressing a small lever on the earpiece with the tip of her hoof. “Can you hear us now?” Luna said, positively delighted at the technological human wonders.

The response was almost immediate. “Yes, I can still hear you. Just like the last time you asked... and the time before that...” A slightly synthetic version of Shane’s voice came from the cushioned pad covering Luna’s ear. He had adjusted the flexible plastic head band to its smallest setting in order to fit the device on Luna’s head until it rested nicely behind her horn.

She didn’t even seem to notice the obvious annoyance in the human’s voice as she once again took flight, too enthralled by the concept of instantaneous communication. She could hear his voice plain as day, despite the fact that he was still sitting in his cell with Twilight Sparkle and Pinkie Pie, likely in the middle of some argument with the bookish purple pony.

Luna had taken it upon herself to put the radios to the test, and was now flitting from place to place, excitedly checking to see if the human could still hear her. The little machine had yet to fail her. If what the human said was true, they would continue to do so up to a number of miles. He went on to dote upon the little machine which were apparently much much nicer than the ones they had in ‘the fleet’, wherever that was. Luna had made the mistake of once again questioning the logic of a military issuing sub-standard equipment, which spurred the human into a very opinionated tirade about the



Army and Navy enjoying ridiculously superior budgets, despite the fact that they were both, as he so eloquently put it, 'gayer than AIDs'.

Clearly the strange brotherly animosity human military branches shared with one another was a subject to be avoided until a later date, when the Marine was feeling less spiteful about whatever perceived wrongs he believed his parental government had done to his people.

"Luna, it's Shane," the human's voice broke over the radio after a few minutes of gentle gliding.

"Who else would it be?" she questioned with a shit eating grin.

"No that's just...you're supposed...shut up," he scolded. Apparently you were expected to communicate differently while using the devices. In a world where several dozen individuals could be using similar devices at once Luna may have understood, but Shane seemed to forget there were currently only a few of these on the entire planet. Annoying him with improper radio etiquette was surely going to prove to be one of her new favorite pastimes.

"There's someone here looking for you." Luna's eyebrow lifted quizzically. "Go talk to your sister. It sounds important."

"We will go there directly," she promised into the microphone

"Roger....don't lose my radio. Out." "TELL HER PINKIE SAID H-" The radio went silent before the pink voice in the background could finish.

Luna chuckled softly before angling her wings toward Celestia's tower.

She landed gracefully, her glittering shoes clicking softly against the marble. Her horn glowed as the balcony doors opened, revealing her sister whose eyes had peeked up from her gold rimmed reading glasses.

"...what are you wearing?" the snowy alicorn said after shooting an inquisitive glance of her baby sister's headgear.

“A wondrous invention,” she beamed as she began removing it to offer Celestia.

The princess of the sun did not, however, return her younger sisters smile. “It will have to wait a moment Luna.” Celestia slid one of the magazines toward the edge of her desk.

Luna’s own smile slowly faded as she stared at the cover. Luna sighed tiredly after only a brief moment. She raised a hoof to the side of her head, ignoring Celestia’s look of confusion as she began to speak.

“...Major?” she paused. “I think you're going to want to see this.”

~~~~~

“Unknown subspecies... ...genetic experiment gone wrong?” the human read aloud as he thumbed the pages of the magazine. “I like that one,” he commented to the pink puffy pony at his side as he habitually ran his hands through her curly pink mane. He sounded oddly amused by the article, as they admired scanned the printed words.

Rarity was flipping through a magazine with Applejack reading over her shoulder. Rainbow Dash was asleep in an arm chair, apparently having woken up from a very serious nap to attend the impromptu meeting.

“How did this even happen?” Twilight questioned desperately as she stared intently at the cover of her own copy. Her mind played over and over the night the photo was taken. She couldn’t for the life of her recall any stray ponies at that hour. To know that there was not only somepony watching her, but to see the evidence in the form of a published article, was unnerving to say the least. For it was undoubtedly her on the cover, plodding a few paces behind the princess.

“It’s really nothing more than bad luck,” Luna replied distastefully. “Somepony just so happen to be in the right place at the right time. Nothing more or less.”

"I look taller," Shane said idly, more concerned with the photo itself than what its potential fallout. He glanced around the room at the assembled herd of equines. "Although it's not like I have very stiff competition."

The ponies ignored the muttered comment about their stature. "So what are we going to do? Can you stop it?" Twilight asked somewhat desperately.

"No," Celestia replied. "Even if we could, we wouldn't. For all intents and purposes this article changes nothing. It's too late for this to do any harm. I just wanted you all to be aware of the situation and know that day to day life may need to be a bit more carefully handled."

Luna piped up from her side of the couch. "I think we may have been afforded an interesting opportunity here," she offered. "If anything I think this may be a good thing." Luna's unusual appraisal of the situation now had all ears attentively awaiting an explanation. "This is nothing we weren't expecting to happen anyway. Secrets kept within castle walls tend not to stay secret for very long. It was only ever a matter of time before the idle conversations of guards and castle staff made the human public knowledge anyway. At least now we have the benefit of knowing when and how the rumors reveal themselves."

"Ah think she mite have a point," Applejack finally chimed in after like five chapters without a speaking role. "Ponies are a gossip lot. It was gonna slip out an if ya address it now, ya get tha chance to git ahead of the herd and lead it where ya wanna go."

"My point exactly," Luna said thankfully. "We have said it before, ponies will react according to how WE react. If we approach this cautious optimism, our subjects will do the same. But if we attempt to hide this and cover our tails like frightened foals then they shall respond with like reactions."

"Are you saying you want to purposefully expose the human before the official announcement?" Rarity asked, slightly taken aback by the proposition.

“Yes and no. Nothing so calculated. But a few incidental appearances or sightings could serve us well, I think. It would simultaneously ease ponies into the news and also prove that we are not attempting to hide anything.” Luna sounded confident about the idea. “No more armed escorts, no more scheming under the cover of night. We go about our day as if the human is nothing more than a typical visiting ambassador. Should somepony begin to ask questions, we answer them truthfully. Major Doran is a representative of an allied race of humans from a faraway land.” She shuffled her wings, making herself more comfortable. “That alone would be enough to slate the curiosity of most ponies. In a few days time, Celestia will call for a press conference and only then will we reveal the true depth of the situation.

“You don’t think ponies will be upset that you withheld the full truth from them?” Twilight asked uncertainly.

Luna huffed with a grin. “We could announce the institution of free ice cream day and there would still be ponies upset by the notion. There will always be a number of dissenting opinions, regardless of the news or the way it is released. I’m afraid they will simply have to ‘get over it’.”

“But do you really want to give Shane, unescorted access to the castle?” Twilight continued skeptically.

“Yeah, I’m sitting right here,” the human pointed out dryly.

The collected equines ignored him. “Not entirely unescorted. Between the eight of us, somepony will be able to keep him from getting into trouble.”

“Once again... still sitting here...hearing everything that’s being said.”

“Very well then,” Celestia began, “It might be somewhat trying, but our time until the conference is numbered in mere days. We shouldn’t have to maintain much of a ruse for very long. The griffon Prime Minister is well on his way by now. Shining Armor will surely want to send for Cadence. Our time for stalling is running short.” She turned to Shane who was looking calculatingly

disinterested. "In the mean time, I need you to focus on your exams."

"Oh, you can see me? Wonderful," he said bitinglly unhappy with being ignored.

"Stop being dramatic," she chided. "You have a lot to do tomorrow. Luna and Twilight will walk you through everything. And remember the more you cooperate the sooner it will be over."

"Noted," Shane answered absentmindedly running his fingers through Pinkie Pie's curly mane. The pink earth pony merely rolled her neck back and forth, leading the human's fingers wherever her heart desired. From the dopey look of shameless satisfaction, it was becoming painfully clear why the mare usually made a point of commanding the seat closest to the human.

"Umm, Major?" Fluttershy's timid voice emerged from the silence.

Shane's relatively calm appearance immediately soured at the timid pegasus' words. He stared abjectly off into the distance, clearly waiting for something.

"Oh!" Fluttershy stammered, "Right!" She lowered the polarized lenses of the human's Oakleys over her eyes, as was stipulated by Shane if she were to be allowed in the room. The nose piece was a bit small to rest comfortably on her muzzle, but the reflective glasses covered her satanic eyes fairly well.

"Now, what?" Shane asked, adequately satisfied.

"Um... well I was wondering, if just maybe you might be alright with me coming along with you and Twilight tomorrow for a few of the tests?" The butter colored pegasus tapped the tips of her hooves together self consciously as the words left her mouth.

It was a daring, if not adorable, request coming from Fluttershy. Regardless he was fairly prompt to shoot the idea down with a curt and immediate, "No."

Celestia sat up, extending a wing across Fluttershy shoulders comfortingly. "I am sure Shane wouldn't mind in the least bit if you

were to accompany them.” She assured the mare in a sweet tone, despite the warning glare she was leveling at the human the whole while.

He glared back at the solar alicorn, his mouth screwed shut with discontent, only breaking his frown when Pinkie nudged his hand with her nose, unhappy with the lack of attention. He begrudgingly returned to scratching behind her ears.

~~~~~

Celestia sat upon her throne, dealing with the daily grind of government work with surprisingly little difficulty that morning. No issues arose that were overly complicated. Each problem that presented itself was handled with practiced ease. She refused to jinx the day by saying it was going too well, but it was a delightful change of pace nevertheless.

So far it had seemed that nopony had seen fit to mention the article that was supposed to hit the shelves only a few hours ago. Perhaps she had overestimated the fallout of the leak.

She rose from her gilded throne. With most of her daily obligations fulfilled she didn't think there was any reason she could not excuse herself for a moment to stretch her legs and roam for a bit. She still had an hour or two until her court officially opened anyway.

The solar diarch trotted toward the massive doors leading out of the throne room. The two gray coated unicorns lit the enormous frames with a dull glow of magic, opening the way for their princess.

Celestia took a few more steps forward before stopping in her tracks. On the other side of the portal stood a crowd of ponies patiently waiting for her courts to convene. A good number sported cameras or large note taking pads. But slightly more chilling was the fact that nearly all of them carried a copy of a certain flashy looking magazine in their hooves.

The conglomeration of reporters, nobles, and everyday concerned or curious citizens seemed momentarily surprised by the Princess' sudden appearance. It only took a second for them to snap into

action. Flashing camera bulbs and an uproar of voices suddenly shattered the previously silent chamber. Each one struggled to have their voices heard over the others who were all asking a slightly differing version of the same question.

“Enough!” Celestia shouted, flaring her massive wings for emphasis. The crowd’s sudden silence was almost just as jarring as the cacophony of questions had been.

“Now,” she said in a much cooler manner, “Calmly and sensibly explain to me what exactly is the meaning of this?” She already knew, but for the sake of appearances she figured it would be best to play it down as much as possible.

“Princess Celestia,” a young light brown mare lowered her nose toward the floor in a hasty gesture, “Have you seen the latest issue of the Canterlot Exclusive?”

“I am afraid not, my little pony,” she answered maintaining a perfect mask of slight confusion. “Is that what has you all in such a frenzy?”

The collected mass of equines nodded. The mare offered the alicorn her copy, which Celestia took and examined carefully for a moment while the mass of ponies breathlessly waited for her reaction. A little bit of acting could go a long way.

They were, if nothing else, surprised when she started to laugh lightheartedly. She wiped a non existent tear of mirth from the corner of her eye. “I swear, sometimes it seems you all look for excuses to incite a panic. It’s just a silly article my little ponies.”

The group finally let out their collective breath. Each releasing a sigh of pointed relief. They smiled at one another amicably.

“So it’s not true princess?” One concerned stallion in the back piped.

“What do you mean?” she feigned ignorance.

“About the creature in the picture. It’s fake, right?” She fixed the group with an amused stare.

“Of course it’s true,” she answered simply.

They froze in place, as if not a single one was sure they had heard correctly.

“...w-what?”

“That was Major Shane Doran,” she explained. “He is a representative from a race of humans very long way away, and our personal guest. He has been staying here in the castle for almost two weeks now. Have you really not noticed him until now?”

They all shook their heads, looking somewhat pale, but not yet in a panic.

“Is he...dangerous?” the inevitable question came. Ponies after all were by nature an ever cautious species of prey.

“From what I understand he is a member of a clan of very talented warriors. But I can assure you, he means Equestria no harm.” Which isn’t exactly a lie, she justified.

“Princess!” a pegasus from the back eagerly began waving a hoof in the air for attention. “Would it be possible to schedule an interview with it?”

“I’m sure you could try but would not expect it to be any time soon. The Major has been exceedingly busy assisting us with several scientific endeavors.” Being a lab rat for example. She added in her mind. “You see his species has only recently been discovered, and he has very generously agreed to help us understand more about them. I was planning on hosting a press conference after the conclusion of our studies. If you’re genuinely interested, you could simply attend, we will be more than happy explain all of our findings in detail then.”

“It’s fluent in Equestrian?” the mare from earlier asked, noting it in her book.

“He speaks it quite well.” A thought suddenly occurred to her. “Although he seems to have difficulty understanding the appropriate use of swear words. So I’ll apologize in advance for any



offence he may inadvertently give. It is most likely a mere misunderstanding of verbiage.” The reporters chuckled lightheartedly at the thought. Truthfully Celestia was rather proud that she came up with the excuse on the spot. The human’s apparent need to swear would have come off as hostile or uncultured to the general public. Playing it off as lingual confusion could very well mask the casual rudeness in his normal speaking voice.

“Princess Celestia,” a noble looking unicorn began, “Forgive the impertinence, but if a foreign dignitary is visiting why were the members of senate or houses not informed?”

“Well I wouldn’t exactly call his visit ‘political’. It’s more of a scientific endeavor, really.” Again not exactly a lie. She would have to end this impromptu interview soon before the ponies began seeing the obvious exclusions in her story and asking more difficult questions.

“Princess where exactly is this human from?” Like that one. She thought tiredly.

She was going to have to answer this one very carefully. She couldn’t outright lie now only to confess the truth a few days later. But she also couldn’t reveal the truth prematurely. So her mind settled on the middle ground. Do neither.

“Well, truthfully we’re not entirely sure.” The crowd ceased their minute ministrations and fixed the princess with confused stares. “He’s doing his best to explain it to us. But so far the best we understand is that he is from somewhere very far away, and he has gone to impossible lengths to get here.”

“Why IS he here,” the same pony asked.

“He seems to have stumbled upon us entirely by accident. He mentioned to me that he did not actually expect to find any sentient life here.” She stopped herself, before she dropped too many hints that he was actually an alien. “He seemed just as surprised by us as we were by him.”

“You mentioned he will be holding a public release to inform the general public?”

“That is correct. But he will not be hosting the conference himself. I will be in attendance along with my sister to answer any questions you might have.”

“So we won’t actually get to see it?”

“Oh I’m certain you’ll see him eventually, but he’s been keeping a very tight schedule recently, working tirelessly to help us better understand his species.”

~~~~~

An obnoxious snore cut through the small waiting room. Shane was fast asleep in a chair too small for his frame while his head lolled against the wall of the waiting room.

Twilight rolled her eyes at the noise. Maybe he would be more awake if he kept some semblance of a normal sleeping schedule. He would fluctuate between an inane ability to stay awake for days on end, to not being able to go more than six hours without a nap.

Dash stood on the chair next to him sticking her face into his precious personal bubble. “Hey.” With no visible response she poked him in the cheek a few times. “Hey!”

He snorted and jerked a bit, from the sudden jolt back to consciousness. He saw the rainbow-maned pegasus through his half open eyes and frowned. “What?” he croaked still not fully awake.

“I need you to do the thing again.” She said plainly, holding the human’s media playing device on her nose.

“What thing?” he asked still blinking and sniffing.

“The thing that makes this work again,” she insisted. “It keeps telling us it’s locked.”

He lazily plucked the device from her nose, running his thumb over the screen a few times. He hit the button on the side one last time

before handing it back to the excited mare.

She thanked the human as she hopped back down toward Twilight and Fluttershy. Shane grumbled something and nestled lower in his chair, hugging his shotgun like a stuffed animal. He was back asleep before Dash even sat down.

“Jeez he can sleep anywhere.” She commented chuckling. “And that’s coming from me.” She set the device back on the ground. “Wait. What’s this?”

The screen usually had a series of symbols, one to play, one to pause, two to control volume, and two to change songs. This screen was new. It was a row of words, with a small simple picture of a house on the corner.

> Music

> Videos

> Pictures

> Radio

> Marketplace

> Internet

The list of options produced a whole new series of questions. She had already seen the section for music, as fun as that was to explore, the fact that the device could do things other than play songs was too intriguing to pass up.

She touched Radio with the tip of her hoof. She and Dash immediately winced as static filled the ear pieces. She hurriedly tapped the volume button to a tolerable level. While Dash removed the bud and massaged her ear, shooting Twilight an irritated look.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m new to this,” she offered flicking her own ear to work out the pain. Now that Radio was out of the question she tried another one.

## Pictures

Twilight couldn't see anything wrong with the option. Curiosity moved her hoof toward the screen, clicking the button. No pictures presented themselves, but a new list replaced the old. There was Library, Date, Slideshow, and Favorites.

She touched favorites. A series of pictures scrolled onto the screen. Dozens of tiny frames all neat scrollable rows of four. She touched the first one. It was a still shot of an old barn. There was another human in the distance. Male from what she could tell. But she didn't think it was Shane. He was roughly the same height, but his hair was darker and his build was heavier. It made Twilight think of a laborer. She scrolled the picture away.

The next was definitely Shane, albeit a bit younger. His face was the same yet somehow completely different. He wasn't frowning or glaring. He was smiling, not the sarcastic or condescending smile she knew, a genuine one. His eyes were wider and considerably brighter. He was dressed in a neatly pressed military uniform. It was a sharp green dress uniform with prim khaki shirt and tie, capped with an ornate black and green ceremonial cover.

He was standing with another human. Twilight wanted to say he was the one from the first picture. He held an arm around a grinning Shane's shoulder,

Twilight's eyes widened as the obvious realization struck her. The other man was Shane's father.

The older human had wore a dark blue jacket and simple white shirt and yellow tie. His tanned face was worn. The more she thought about it the more the description lumberjack seemed appropriate. He easily broke six feet tall, and even managed to make Shane, whom she had previously thought massive, look normal by contrast. Although if the humans in the background were any comparison she began to think their size could be hereditary. He had a neatly trimmed beard, which was beginning to gray. His brown eyes were darker than Shane's blue ones. An attribute he must have inherited from his mother wherever she was, Twilight had no idea. But there was a light in the older man's face. His

darker eyes were glittering with a pride that could only be felt by a parent seeing their children succeed.

“Wow,” Dash piped up from behind Twilight. “Look how young he looks.”

Twilight felt a chill of surrealism. She was looking into the past of another dimension. The captured memories of an alien no less.

She scrolled again. There were several dozen humans. All dressed in the same desert camouflaged uniforms Shane wore. One was in a strange adaptation of the same in blue. She would ask him about that later. It was nearly impossible to tell which one was Shane. They all looked remarkably similar, and the clarity wasn't exactly spectacular.

She scrolled again. This was definitely Shane. Although she wasn't sure what exactly she was seeing. A helmet and polarized goggles covered most of his face. He was crouched by the hood of a heavy boxy tan vehicle. It was peppered with a line of neat little holes along the side, and a few in the front of the thick windshield. There were several other humans in the distance. Wherever they were, it looked hot. The dry sandy environment made all the armor and equipment look miserable.

Shane was making a strange gesture with his fingers with a wicked smile. Another Marine in the behind the vehicle was holding a crude sign made of cardboard. They had written “#UNBREAKABLE” in hastily scrawled letters.

“What are all these?” Fluttershy asked quietly. She had wondered over to see what all the interest was.

“I think they're pictures that Shane took before he came here,” Twilight explained shortly.

“Well I doubt he took them after he came here.” Dash pointed out snickering. Twilight ignored her, scrolling to the next picture.

The next was similar. Shane was holding a cardboard sign. This time the smile was sad. This time the sign was longer. “Happy

birthday Kylie, Sorry I missed it.”

Twilight scrolled. Through several more. Mostly very similar. Marines, she didn't recognize, usually doing something silly or drawing something inappropriate on things. Several were destroyed buildings, burned out vehicles, a wall riddled with bullet holes. Then one caught her eye.

It was Shane again, dressed in plain clothes. He was sitting in an armchair. He was holding a small bundle in a light pink blanket. There was a female human behind the chair leaning over the backrest apparently in the middle of a soft laugh. Even though Twilight had never seen a female of Shane's species. It was painfully obvious. She had softer features, her eyes were a familiar marbled blue. Her hair fell around her shoulders in dark blonde waves. She was very pretty if Twilight were any judge of such things, but with only vague assumptions about human concepts of beauty she could really only guess.

Her eyes turned back to the odd bundle of blankets in Shane's arms, which was held with such soft reverence it reminded her of... Twilight felt her stomach flip when it hit her like a lead brick. It was a baby...

She froze. Twilight looked up at the sleeping human to ensure he was still unconscious. She suddenly felt like she was invading something private.

“Is that...” Rainbow trailed off.

“It's a foal,” Fluttershy said covering her mouth with a hoof. “He had a foal!?” Fluttershy exclaimed almost panicked.

“Shhhh!” Twilight hushed the pegasus. She looked over her shoulder. Shane was still fast asleep. “We have to show these to the Princess,” she said finally.

A nurse came out of a door, holding a stack of papers and very small vial of dark red blood. Twilight snatched the device off the floor. She wasn't sure why.

Twilight recognized the nurse. It was the beige unicorn mare from the checkup yesterday. Twilight felt slightly guilty that she never asked for her name.

“And here we are!” the nurse said cheerily. “I’m sorry it took so long. We couldn’t use any magical analysis. Had to do it the old fashioned way.” She offered an apologetic smile.

“No apology necessary,” Twilight assured nervously. “I completely understand. Thank you for all your help.” The purple unicorn stuffed the paperwork into her saddlebags.

“I think you’ll want to read over that when you get the chance, we had some very unusual findings. We’re not sure what it all means. Nothing really bad from what I could tell, just ...different.” The nurse eyeballed the still sleeping human with an odd expression.

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Twilight promised. “Thank you again.” The nurse smiled happily and nodded. “Dash wake him up, we need to get going or we’ll be late for the next appointment.”

The pegasus hopped to her hooves trotting over to Shane. Rainbow put her forelegs on his chest and pushed, rocking the human back and forth. “Hey! Wake up! We’re need to get go-IIING!” The pegasus yelped as Shane sleepily reached out and grabbed her around the barrel and pulled her close to his chest like a blue feathery pillow.

Rainbow’s face flushed beat red at the human’s unconscious affection. She tried futilely to squirm away, but every time she did he only hugged the pegasus tighter. Even nuzzling the top of her mane while murmuring in his sleep.

“Awww,” the nurse cooed at the sight. Twilight tried her very best not to laugh.

“Help!” Rainbow managed to plea from her cuddled prison.

~~~~~

Luna slammed the door to the throne room, sealing out a writhing mob of questions and curiosity. She leaned against the massive

frame to catch her breath.

Celestia looked up from her comically oversized stack of documents. "Oh good. You already know."

"That is one way to put it," she replied collecting herself. "We did not anticipate it being this bad."

"Do you think we made a mistake?"

"Nay. They are merely curious. Just as they were when the first of the minotaur lords landed on our shores."

"That was centuries ago," she noted dryly.

"Ponies may change over the years but their nature does not," she replied perceptively.

"True and sagacious, though that may be, I am afraid we are still are left to deal with the masses for the next few days with little to nothing to give them in the way of answers."

"Ponies love a good mystery," she smiled.

"Luna, be serious," Celestia reprimanded.

"What do you wish me to do, Celestia? We knew this was going to happen. We only have to avoid the big questions for the next few days, and then we can both rest easy knowing it will only get much worse." Luna's words were without sympathy or comfort, but they were true and the elder alicorn knew it. "It's big news. Possibly the biggest news in Equine history. We are not alone in the universe. There are others out there. Others that make our most advanced technologies look like the simple minded tinkering of small illiterate children. The world will not take kindly to this type of revelation. You know this. There will be panic. There will be fear. And I for one have to admit it is not entirely unjustified." Luna shuffled her wings into a more comfortable position.

"Not to mention the fact that we alone are sitting on trillions upon trillions of bits worth of alien devices. Even the non-functional equipment would be worth staggering amounts of money.



Corporations, private firms, banks..." Celestia rambled on. "Spell gems are a multinational business. What happens when they find out this human came along and made every aspect of their product obsolete with some new device that's centuries ahead of ours."

"Ponies will be mad," Luna responded simply. "I am sorry to say it, but it's the truth. Markets will change, stocks will crash, and fortunes will be lost. But new ones will take their place. It will take time. But things shall inevitably even out again. For now, however, we can do nothing but weather the storm and hope that we learn enough from these tests to ease their fear and slate the brunt of their curiosity."

The massive throne room doors cracked and a guard stuck his head inside. "I'm sorry to interrupt highnesses but...the Griffon Prime Minister's chariot has just arrived."

"He's early," Celestia murmured sourly.

"Don't be so glum, sister. I am actually looking forward to this."

~~~~~

She was older than Twilight, possibly in her thirties. Snow Drift was her name. It fit her soft white coat breezy blue mane. "Stand on the platform and take off your shirt," the pegasus mare instructed in polite but firm tone.

"Well you're awfully forward." Shane grinned as he stepped onto the small platform.

"Don't get your hopes up, tiger. I'm a married mare," she grinned right back and she slipped on a long white lab coat that matched her white fur. She worked her wings through the holes cut in the side of the garment. "Besides, as a doctor I could never fraternize with one of my patients."

"Well, you're a veterinarian so I would kinda hope not." he teased as he pulled off the skivvy shirt tossing it towards the rest of his things.

"You're an astute one," she said amusedly. "Did they tell you

beforehand or was it all the posters of cats and dogs that gave it away.”

“Cats and dogs.”

“Ah,” she smiled in mock surprise. “Well I suppose we’ll get started. Come here and let me have a look at you.”

Shane knelt down for the mare. She gripped his head in between her hooves and stared at his face for a moment.

“Is this part of it?” he asked sounding confused.

“Shush, and yes,” she answered curtly.

She rolled his head back and forth. Pausing occasionally to place a slight pressure in certain spot. She pulled down on an eyelid, humming to herself. “Keep your head still and follow my hoof with your eyes.” She kept one of her hooves on his cheek to steady his head while the other touched his nose and pulled away, venturing left and right, then up and down. “Say, AAH.”

Shane opened his jaws mimicking the noise. She nodded and bobbed her head, occasionally pulling back on his lips to reveal his teeth.

“Alright,” she murmured to herself.

She moved her hooves down his neck, having him move his head from side to side as she did. She continued down his front, pushing and prodding, and offering simple commands. “Lift your arms.” He did. She placed a stethoscope in her ears, pressing the metal end to his ribs.

He stiffened uncomfortably. “Oh by the way it might be a little cold,” she added dryly. He sniffed and shook his head. “Breath normally, please.”

She continued for several minutes. Pressing this or prodding that. She would tap on bones and joints. Searching for what, Twilight had no idea. Rainbow Dash was clearly regretting coming along for this portion. It wasn’t very exciting. Fluttershy on the other hand

was watching with rapt attention.

The doctor let out a slow whistle when she came to his back. Shane stiffened as she ran a hoof over the skin above his hip, tracing the strange pattern of scars that peppered his flesh. "What happened?"

Shane opened his mouth to answer, but closed it again. He cleared his throat, awkwardly rubbing the back of his head. "I caught a cluster of rocket shrapnel outside Al-Safira on my second deployment." His tone was somewhat distant.

"A rocket?" the doctor asked, still poking at the area, much to his apparent displeasure.

"Put about ten ounces of shrapnel in my hip." He laughed attempting feebly to make it sound genuine. "I didn't even know until they tried to pull me out of my truck." He let out another humorless chuckle, shaking his head. "We got shwacked like six miles outside the city. I thought I pissed myself at first, my seat was all hot and wet, couldn't move my leg, then they came to yank me out...there was a shard stuck in the bone. I never screamed so hard in my whole fuckin life." He chuckled humorlessly as he searched his pockets for a cigarette.

Everypony stuck the human with a kind of shocked look of confusion and horror. Dash's eyes were wide with excitement.

The doctor was the first to compose herself. "Did you suffer any negative lasting effects?"

"It hurts sometimes. The doctors just said it was phantom pain from the surgery though. So they basically told me to just suck it up." He explained with annoyance.

"I see..." she continued.

She had the human perform a few simple tasks. She would have him roll his head, stretch his arms, stand on one leg, flex this, bend that. She spent a surprising amount of time on his fingers, carefully appraising the digits' dexterity.

She prodded along his stomach before a curious hoof moved a little

too far south for the human's liking. He snatched the mares hoof like a snake and pulled the doctor up to eye level as she yelped in surprise.

"Hey!" he poked her in the nose. "No...bad!" he spoke to the doctor like a pet that had piddled on the carpet.

"Oh stop," she chided rolling her eyes, still hanging from the human's grasp. "I'm a doctor."

Shane set the pegasus down. "I don't care. You're going to have to take me to dinner first just like everyone else."

"I have a husband," she reminded a playful grin on her face.

"He isn't invited," Shane crossed his arms resolutely.

~~~~~

The griffon stepped out from the carriage, rolling his powerful auburn wings. He may have been getting on in years, but he was still an impressive specimen. His chestnut fur covered his lithe lower half, melding into his smoky gray feathers.

He looked up at the castle. Canterlot was a beautiful city without a doubt, but it had always come across a little too flashy for his taste. It was a nice vacation spot but not somewhere, he decided, he would care to live.

He noticed a retinue of ponies approaching. He smiled when he saw Princess Luna at the head of the pack. Ponies loved smiling after all. Not that griffons didn't per se. But with ponies it almost seemed a social requirement, rather than a genuine depiction of emotion.

"Princess Luna," he said warmly bowing his head as a gesture of respect.

"Oh please, minister," Luna laughed, "Dispense with the formalities. I wouldn't call this an official business visit." Yet... she added in her mind.

"Forgive me. Those in my position do well to maintain our precious

courtesies,” he chuckled back. “How have you been, Luna?”

She sighed. “Well enough I suppose. Busy,” she added distastefully.

“I understand,” he sympathized. “I had to pull more than a few strings to weasel myself a bit of vacation time to sneak off here.”

“I hope it wasn’t too much trouble.”

He waved a claw dismissively. “My position allows me the unique ability to schedule the occasional getaway under the guise of ‘foreign relations’.”

“I’m happy you accepted. I think you’ll find it an interesting learning experience.” She spoke with an odd inflection the griffon could not identify.

“I’m actually quite excited. I may not be the foremost authority in astronomy, but I’ve found it helps exponentially to know a pony who is, how you say, in the business.” He laughed at his own joke.

“Come along then. I shan’t waste any time.”

~~~~~

“We have it in the medical wing while we perform a few additional tests,” Luna said with a wave of the hoof.

They passed a number of doors, the majority of which appeared to be labs, medical offices, and research facilities. The section of the castle was an interesting contrast to the rest of the structure. Most of the royal palace radiated a sense of elderly warmth; large colorful stained glass windows and elaborate tapestries. This, however, was more sterile. It was whitewashed and clean, utilitarian and business-like.

The griffon was a little confused why house a rock in a medical facility, rather than say, an academy laboratory, but his excitement suppressed his urge to question providence.

Luna led him into a final room toward the end of the hall. There was a room with several chairs facing an observation window.

Celestia sat in one, regarding the pair with a hesitant, somewhat remorseful smile. His confusion finally directed his gaze to the glass screen, through which the griffon saw, what was possibly the strangest sight he had ever seen in his many years of life.

There was a creature, the likes of which Magneus had never seen nor heard, running in place on a treadmill. There was an array of sensors and wires attached to the creature's stomach and chest, along his arms, and on his neck. A plastic mask covered the majority of his face monitoring the measured draw of breath the thing took as it ran. A retinue of ponies of all colors and shapes studied machines or scribbled on clip boards, all frantically noting whatever strangeness was happening in the room.

"Is this a joke?" the griffon asked in somewhat of a daze.

"I am afraid not," Luna said seriously. "You wished to see the object that fell from the heavens that night?" Luna extended a hoof toward the window. "There he is."

"Princess...what are you trying to tell me," he asked quietly.

"It was not a meteorite, Prime Minister." Celestia stepped in. "It was a ship."

"That isn't possible." His mind immediately denied.

"A few weeks ago, I would have agreed," Luna scoffed.

"It crashed several miles south of Manehattan," Celestia continued to explain. "He was the only survivor."

"Now you're telling me there are others!?" the griffon shook his head, his mind already swimming with confusion and uncertainty. "Where did it even come from?"

"A different plane of existence. A stream not of our own."

"No! That's not possible. It's...science fiction. You can't expect me to believe this! You cannot jump slipstreams. It can't be done!" he denied almost frantically.

“Magneus,” Celestia began softly. “These things have technologies advanced beyond what we could ever possibly imagine. And they’ve found a way. But with his vessel destroyed... he’s stranded here.”

The griffon sat down hard, watching the creature run endlessly in place. He worked a claw down his face. “What do they want?” he asked with quiet desperation. “Why are they even here?”

“If what he’s told us is true, they arrived purely by accident.”

He laughed humorlessly, “And now you’ve spoken with it? How do you cross planes of existence by accident?”

“He says the ship was experimental. The idea was to fold the fabric of reality over on itself to cross two incredibly distant points instantaneously. Something went wrong, and they punched straight through the barrier dividing our worlds.”

The griffon just shook his head. Hoping desperately this was all a nightmare that he would soon wake from.

“Magneus, we invited you here for a reason. We need your help.”

“Do you understand what this means?” he asked softly.

“Yes, we do,” Luna replied gravely. “Which is exactly why we need the Empire’s help. We have been close allies for a very long time, Minister. The world is going to know about this one way or another. We thought we would extend the courtesy of a little early warning.”

“I almost wish you hadn’t,” he rubbed his eyes. “How am I supposed to tell the Queen this?” he asked dreadfully. “She’ll have me in a mental hospital before I finish a sentence.”

Celestia almost laughed. The griffon queen was young for her station, having inherited the position from her father after he passed. Yet despite her age, she had established herself well in her rule, proving more than capable of the job. She was proud, methodical, decisive, and fiercely intelligent. No doubt thanks to the years of preening from her father readying her for the throne.

“Can I speak to it?” he asked finally.

“Of course,” Luna offered, approaching the glass.

“What is it like?”

“He’s an ass,” the lunar princess said sourly, earning more than a confused look from the griffon.

“You’ll see for yourself,” Celestia explained.

Luna tapped on the glass barrier with a hoof. The creature turned his head, now panting heavily and glistening with sweat.

The dark alicorn waved a hoof at the alien amicably. He presented his middle finger to the diarch, before returning to his running.

“What was that?” the griffon asked.

“We’re not sure yet,” she admitted.

~~~~~

One of the lab ponies offered the towering creature a towel which he gratefully accepted, still breathing laboriously. The lab ponies made themselves busy documenting every possible thing that had occurred during the test. The human wasn’t particularly fast, but he had kept a steady pace up to a number of miles. His physiology made his species, not necessarily sprinters, more like marathon runners. Even young ponies would likely be able to outrun him at full tilt, but he would still be there plodding along long after they had collapsed from exhaustion. He even explained that that was the trait that had allowed his species to hunt and kill game far faster than even the fastest human.

The creature dried himself, catching his breath, and being repeatedly denied a smoke break from the princess’ protégée.

“Not bad,” Rainbow approached the human flitting up to hover on his level. “Keep it up and I might have to make you my new workout partner.”



The human laughed breathlessly. “You workout?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she immediately became defensive.

He raised his hands innocently. “Nothing, ...you’re just kinda... skinny,”

“What?! I am not skinny! I’m aerodynamic!”

He just laughed, apparently happy to have gotten under the pegasus’ feathers. He found his shirt. He tugged on the olive colored apparel, before pausing for a second. He squinted at the window in the back of the room.

“What the fuck is that?” he pointed dramatically at the griffon standing with the princesses.

~~~~~

The griffon froze. The alien saw him. It was pointing right at him. Oh ancestors it’s getting up!

Luna laughed. “Uh oh, he’s noticed you.”

“What does it want?!” he asked nervously looking to the alicorns.

“He’s probably just curious. He’s never seen a griffon before.”

The Prime Minister looked back into the room, heart sinking with cold dread when the creature was no longer present.

The door to the observation room burst open. “What’s that??” Shane practically screamed with wide excited eyes.

The griffon let out an involuntary squawk of fear as he was blindsided by the alien creature.

~~~~~

Celestia had never seen Shane this enthralled, or Magneus this uncomfortable. The whole scene was immensely amusing. Shane

was utterly fascinated with Magneus, and made that fact apparent with his complete disregard for the griffon's personal space.

"Major, this is Magneus Ren, Prime Minister of the Griffon Empire."

"Ooooooh," he cooed spellbound. He squished the Prime Ministers face between his hands, cocking his head to and fro. "Look at you! You're like two things!" Shane stood facing Celestia with a deathly serious gaze. "I want one."

"What?" Celestia asked, unsure what he meant.

"I want one," he repeated. "Get me one of these," he lifted the griffon by his cheeks.

"Shane you can't have one," Celestia explained, amazed that she even had to do so. "Griffons are not pets-"

"NA Ah ah!" he cut off, "You can't just wave eagle hybrids in front of my face and then tell me I can't have one. This is metal as fuck." He grabbed the griffons claw, holding it out toward Celestia. "It's got talons! And wings!"

"Umm...excuse me..." the Prime Minister interrupted.

Shane looked down at it with eyes as wide as dinner plates, turning back to the alicorn. "AND IT CAN TALK!"

~~~~~

"Stop staring," Twilight said through the corner of her mouth.

Shane ignored her, and continued to stare at Magneus with unbridled wonder, as he had through the entire meal.

Magnues cleared his throat trying vainly to regain some semblance of political discourse. "So...Major...Celestia tells me you are in the military. Certainly an admirable station. But if I am to ally myself to your cause, I would very much like to understand your species a bit better. I am sorry to admit but you must understand that this is a very delicate situation for us, and there will be more than a few that might question your...motives."

Twilight elbowed the human in the side after several awkward moments of silence passed. Shane jolted. "What? ...Oh...Sorry, I was imagining riding you into battle."

The griffon choked on his food coughing up a sesame seed.

"What was the question?"

"He wants to get to know you better," Luna shortened over the top of her glass.

"Oh," Shane almost sounded disappointed. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, ahem, where exactly is it you are from?"

"America. Born in Kentucky, little town south of the Ohio river."

Magneus just looked at him puzzled.

"Planet called Earth? Not helping is it?"

"I am afraid not," the griffon admitted sadly. "Perhaps you could explain how you got here, or better yet why you came in the first place?"

"Well..." Shane sipped his own drink. Celestia had limited him to one glass of wine since they were entertaining foreign diplomats. "It's a rather complicated story that I'm not fully privy to myself. But the short and sweet version is that we were chillin' in our own universe, testing an experimental deep space vehicle. There were eleven of us mostly military scientists. I was part of a small security force, Marines. When we dove in into slipspace something went wrong. Our engine's governors blew along with several other key systems. We dropped out as a safety measure. When everybody came-to we were here. When we tried to re-light the engines to get home they exploded and the planets gravity pulled us to the surface where we crashed in Sunshine and Moonlight's back yard. You following me?"

"...somewhat," the griffon admitted. "I must confess however much of what you say confuses me."

“Good. It confuses me too.” Shane chuckled dryly. Shane polished off his drink. “What about you? Why did she drag you into this?” Shane nodded his head toward Celestia.

The griffon chuckled. “Actually Princess Luna dragged me into this.” The lunar princess harrumphed. “One of the members of congress spoke about a rumor of a meteorite landing in Equestria. I dabble in astronomy in my spare time. When I sent the Princess a letter asking about it she was noble enough to invite me here. It seems however the guise was to force me into this little conspiracy of hers.”

“Yeah that sounds like her,” Shane nodded. “Very duplicitous.”

“Well done, Major. That word had four syllables!” Luna teased in return.

Shane pointed at the dark alicorn. “You see what I have to put up with?”

The griffon chuckled heartily. This creature was so alien and yet so familiar. “You are an unusual one, Shane Doran. I must say, not at all like the fictional concept of aliens I’ve become accustomed to.”

“Yeah they broke the mold after me,” he grinned.

“For good reason I should think,” Luna jabbed.

“I had imagined little things with large black eyes, flying saucers, and an affinity for probes.”

“Oh I’ve got a probe... You’re just not really my type.”

Rainbow Dash burst into a guffaw of unrepentant laughter at the off color joke, while the griffon chuckled heartily.

“I think the Queen will get quite a kick out of you,” Magneus commented idly. Celestia stiffened.

“What do you mean?” Shane asked.

“When you meet her I mean,” he clarified.

"I'm meeting who when?" Shane's grin began to fade.

"I'm going to take you back to the Empire with me. Her majesty will certainly want to meet you in person. I can hardly explain this in a letter."

Celestia interrupted, worried at the path the conversation had taken. "Magneus, I am afraid that won't be possible."

"That is why you've called me here, is it not? The human is going to come with me back to the Empire. I appreciate what you've done here, Celestia but you can't possibly think that we'll sit idly by while Equestria hordes the greatest scientific find in recorded history."

"That is exactly what we had hoped to avoid by calling you here." Luna interjected. "This isn't about anyone hording anything. We're trying to ease the world into this, not parade the human around like a trophy."

"Do I get a choice?" Shane asked quietly.

"No." Luna asserted.

"You all see how she treats me?" he asked in a victimized voice.

Magneus continued unfazed. "Princess I can appreciate that, but with all do respect, I do not think Equestria is properly equipped to handle a revelation of this magnitude on its own. The Empire WILL back you whole heartedly but we're going to need more than happy assurances to lend our full support. I can not go to the Queen and tell her, the Equestrians have discovered an advanced alien life form and requested we get in line behind them, with nothing to back up my request."

"We will not be sending you back with nothing, Minister, of that you can be certain. We're more than willing to share every piece of information we've collected. But I'm afraid I must insist that all the physical materials remain under our protection. Until we can get a better handle on what we're dealing with."

"Minister you must understand that while I have no doubt the

humans bear us no inherent ill will, any number of the artifacts we've recovered could be infinitely dangerous in the wrong hooves."

The griffon looked at Shane who was nibbling on a piece of celery with an extremely dissatisfied look on his face. The griffon turned back to Celestia with a skeptical look.

"Especially him," she assured with a grave voice. When the griffon's face didn't change she decided to prove it to him. She turned to the human who was playing with his food instead of paying attention. "Shane?"

"What?" he didn't look up from his celery.

"What was your job back on Earth?"

"Kill people."

"And what's that on your back?"

"Shotgun," he answered just as plainly.

"What's it for?"

"Killin' people."

She turned her gaze back to Magneus who seemed a little perturbed, but not yet quite convinced. "Trust me, Minister. There is a part of me that is tempted to let you take all of this off my hooves. But for the mean time, let us handle it. The human is still getting used to life here, he's traumatized dangerous and unstable."

"I am NOT unstable!" Shane contested.

"I think he's unstable!" Shining Armor offered from his quiet spot at the opposite end of the table, an ice pack still wrapped around his head.

"ARMOR!" Shane's mood immediately darkened. "If I hear your voice one more time I'm going to come down there and stab you in it!"

“You’re going to stab me in my voice?” he challenged.

Shane ripped the knife from its sheath and began to climb over the table toward the stallion.

Twilight wrapped her hooves around his midsection, horn aglow, all attempting to keep the human from attacking her brother, for whom he had an inexplicably acute distaste.

Celestia just extended a hoof toward the scene, looking at Magneus with a bored expression.

“...I see. Perhaps it would be best to wait awhile before presenting...this to the Queen...” he admitted.

~~~~~

The human plopped down on his cot and stretched like a large dog.

Luna sat on the padded floor, making herself comfortable. “Alright, Shane. It seems we may have indirectly given you permission to wander the castle.”

Shane chuckled evilly, throwing a devious smirk at the princess.

“Stop that. Don’t make us regret this. I’m really trusting you here,” she pleaded. “We are begging you not to get into trouble. You are an adult, I implore you to act like one.”

“Do I have to talk to people?” Shane stopped snickering long enough to ask.

“Not if you do not wish to. But should the desire strike...”

“Just be myself?”

“No, not that. Be literally anyone but yourself.”

He laughed at the jab. “Well, I have a little project of my own I’ve been meaning to get to, so I don’t think I’ll have much time for sight seeing tomorrow.”

“Twilight will come get you around lunch time for a few more tests.”

“Then I’m done?” he asked hopefully.

“I doubt you will ever really be done. More can always be learned. But survive tomorrow and the next day. That is all the official testing I have scheduled.”

Shane nodded, not pleased with the tests, but clearly happy to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

“What’s this project of yours?” Luna inquired after a moment of silence.

Shane rubbed his face with his palms. “Well...It’s not really easy to explain, so I’ll see if I can even get it to work first. Then I’ll show you,” he promised. “Nothing really all that exciting. Just something I want to try... kind of a hopeful precaution.”

“That sounds rather optimistic for you,” she teased letting her silver saddlebag slide off her back. She circled in place before lying on the floor crossing her hooves in front of her.

He scoffed but continued. “Well... It’s not for me. It’s really for you.”

“You’re making me a present?” Luna’s eyebrow raised and she gave him a skeptical grin.

“Not really,” he smiled back. “But I think you’ll appreciate it anyway. You’ll see.”

Luna nodded, resigned to wait. “It seems I actually have something for you as well.” Her horn lit with shimmering blue magic. Shane sat up, curiously.

The alicorn drew a rectangular box from her saddlebags. She had the academy imbue the gift with several heavy enchantments, but she internally decided to omit that piece of information. Shane was still somewhat wary of magic.



"I originally came down here to give you this." The box levitated its way over to Shane, who took it inquisitively. He opened the rectangular package.

Luna held her breath slightly when she saw his curious smile fade to a frown. He stared inside the box, nodding slowly to himself with a sour look.

"Are you fucking serious?" he asked neutrally

"I thought you would like it," she said sheepishly. "I had it made for you."

Shane reached in the box and held up the black leather band, holding it in the air accusingly. "This is a dog collar."

Luna swore inwardly. She had secretly hoped he would think it was some sort of fashion accessory. "It's not a dog collar," she lied trying to sound offended at the idea. "It's a gift. Just try it on. It will look good on you."

Shane tossed the collar at the lunar princess where it slapped against her chest before falling to the floor with a pathetic plop.

She levitated it back to the human with an insistent frown. "You're not even giving it a chance!"

Shane crossed his arms defiantly before something about the band caught his eye. "What is that?!" He snatched the collar from Luna's magic. A little silver tag dangled from a small silver ring. He turned the circular silver tag over in his hands. "If found contact Princess Luna!? What the fuck is that?!"

"Well what if you get lost?" she defended.

"Uh, I don't know. Maybe I could ask for directions!" he threw the collar back at Luna.

Luna blushed slightly, maybe the tag was a bit much. "You're wearing it." She ordered sternly.

"No I'm not."

“Yes you are!”

NO, I’m NOT!”

Luna picked the collar up in her magic and advanced on the human. She had hoped it wouldn’t come down to this.

~~~~~

The sound of fighting quickened Celestia’s steps as she approached the cell.

“Hold still!”

“NO!”

Celestia reached the door where two tired looking guards stood. If the looks on their faces were anything to go on, this must have been going on for awhile. Shane was literally throwing himself around the small cell, attempting to buck the lunar alicorn from his back, where she had attached herself by wrapping her legs around his middle. Her horn was glowing as she apparently tried to strangle him to death with a black band of leather.

Celestia watched with sight amusement as the large human struggled for his life against the smaller alicorn princess. She knew she should probably stop them before someone got hurt. But it was rather entertaining. Besides, Shane was a resilient young thing, and Luna was an arguably indestructible alicorn. Shane jumped from his cot, flipping over in a very pro-wresting fashion and landing on his back trying to smush the lunar diarch. Luna squawked painfully but didn’t let go. She began feverantly flapping her wings, barely succeeding to lift the large man off the ground whose limbs flailed in protest.

“Am I interrupting something?” Celestia asked calmly snagging the attention of the combatants. Each of whom recognized the new arrival with surprise.

“Yes. Go away,” Shane answered sternly.

~~~~~

Shining Armor stared at the blank parchment for almost an hour. How in the hell was he supposed to explain this to Cadence. His wife would undoubtedly need to come down and visit personally, but he had no idea how to start the letter without sounding like a crazy pony. Dear sweetheart, your aunts captured an alien. Please come say hello to it. He laughed at the thought.

He placed the quill back in the stopper with his magic, waiting for the right words to come. He needed to communicate the severity of the request without panicking the mare. Even if he found the right combination of letters, there was a decent chance Cadence would simply not believe him. He wasn't really the prankish type, but this would come so far out of left field that there was no way she would take it at face value.

He didn't need her to believe him, he finally decided. He just needed to get her here to see for herself. Whether or not she took it seriously was irrelevant.

He lifted the quill once more, scratching the nub against the parchment.

Dear Cadence...

~~~~~

# ARTICLE 2 Part XVI

## ARTICLE 2

### Part XVI

He was already up when Twilight walked into the cell. Usually he was rummaging around fiddling as he so often did. Not that he had much else to do, Twilight reasoned with herself.

But today he seemed purposefully distracted by something. Several alien devices lay at his feet. He carefully watched over them like someone looks at the scattered pieces of a puzzle. Knowing what to do but not quite yet how to go about actually doing it.

His only real acknowledgment of her presence was a quiet hello. In his hands he carefully spun a small black chip between his thumb and pointer finger, admiring the small trinket with jaded curiosity.

Twilight pulled herself onto the opposite end of his cot, curling into a comfortable position to watch him. “Whatcha doin?” she asked, somewhat intrigued.

The human shrugged ambiguously. “Thinkin’,” he answered simply.

Twilight nodded, pursing her lips. She allowed his internal thoughts remain internal, fairly confident that if he wished to share them he would do so.

“What do you think separates your world from mine?” he finally asked, still turning the chip around in his fingers.

Twilight blinked at the sudden question. “A few weeks ago we weren’t even one hundred percent sure other universes existed...” she reminded. “I don’t think I’d be the one to ask.”

“...take a guess,” he encouraged.

Twilight took a deep breath, not entirely sure how to answer him. “Is this a philosophical question, a literal one?”

"I guess by definition it's a philosophical question but I uh... wasn't really after a philosophical answer..." he replied with reasonable sounding nonsense.

Twilight smiled back, "Well, sparring the debate about the nature of inquisitiveness, I would say that we are separated by the fabric of space time itself." The human nodded as if the young unicorn confirmed something he already knew before lapsing back into quiet contemplation. "Hey... Are you feeling alright?" Twilight tried to get his attention.

He mostly ignored her, still paying attention to the chip in his hands. "Fabric is permeable, right?" He asked in an almost joking tone as the chip was tucked away in his breast pocket.

She wasn't sure if he was expecting an answer or not but she answered with a wry smile at the idea. "I don't think the fabric of time and space holds the same... transversary properties as satin and silk."

"It might though, yeah? I mean since we can't definitively say that it doesn't."

"I suppose that would be true... technically," she said matching his roguish grin. "Why are you suddenly so curious?" She finally asked curiously. "What are you planning at?"

"Thinkin' about wasting a lot of time and effort on something that has very little chance of accomplishing anything..." He stood up and began gathering up the devices at his feet, cradling them in his arms, and depositing them on top of the large pelican crate by the wall of his room, using it as a makeshift workbench.

~~~~~

Shane handed the notepad back to the little purple unicorn. "Like that," he finished, returning to his newest pet-project. She had cajoled him into teaching her more about humanity while he worked on his little machines.

Twilight inspected the now corrected notebook. He had written

‘German Irish’ out in bastardized, half print, half cursive writing. She felt a twinge of annoyance at the penmanship. It’s not really that it was difficult to read. He actually had fairly neat handwriting, but the fact that he jumped randomly from one style to another, often right in the middle of words, irked her on some primal level.

Above it he had scribbled out her attempts to recreate the place names. In her defense she had only just heard the terms. She had simply been recording his thoughts as best she could phonetically. It was a slightly flawed system, but it worked for what she hoped to accomplish.

“And these are countries?”

“Yeah,” he answered automatically, not looking up from whatever contraption he was fiddling with.

“But you were not born in them.”

“Nope.”

“So you are American... but also German and Irish.”

He sighed tiredly. “I’m American. But my ancestors migrated from Germany and Ireland. My father’s family was Irish. My mother’s was German.”

“I see,” she said almost to herself as her pencil scrawled across the paper. “Is this kind of migration common among humans?”

“Probably not as much as it used to be. Most mass migrations were driven by wars or famines, politics, what have you,” he twirled his hand generically. “But not exclusively. People can get kind of flighty. Some just kind of decide to pack up and move one day just because they can.”

“Did you?”

He laughed. “No.” He smacked a gadget against the pelican crate in his cell. It was a small tan polymer box with a clear plastic dome. It was slightly larger than a one of his packs of cigarettes. Some wires and electronic innards could be seen protruding from the bottom.

Judging by the way he was beating on it, it wasn't cooperating with him.

"What is that?" Twilight finally asked.

"This," he held the thing with a frown, "is a shiny thing."

Twilight looked skeptically at the dull tan box. "It doesn't look very shiny."

He grinned knowingly but didn't elaborate further. "You'll understand in a minute. I think I can get it going."

Twilight shrugged, letting it go. "Where were we?"

"I don't remember," he admitted.

Twilight re-read her notes. "Revolutionary war," she said aloud, finding where she left off.

"Okay," he started as he continued to tinker. "You remember the colonies? America before it was a country?"

Twilight nodded.

"Uh...bare bones version. Early seventeen hundreds, The British Empire is, for all intents and purposes, the most powerful empire on the planet."

"We already went over that part," she complained. If they were to cover thousands of years of history, she couldn't afford to keep repeating things. They had only scratched the surface of American history. They had an ocean of information to cover still, and despite his best efforts, a historian Shane was not.

~~~~~

The human waxed on for several minutes, retelling a version of the conflict that was clearly heavily edited for time sake and full of swear words. Twilight carefully noting as much as she could, leaving out the profanity.

“And ever since we proudly celebrated our country’s freedom by blowing up small parts of it,” he finished.

“That’s pretty impressive.”

“Yeah, try to take it with a grain of salt though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Because that’s the revolutionary war in a nutshell as told by an American who did not exactly get stellar grades in history. I’m sure the British and French tell that story very differently.”

Twilight smiled making note of the comment. “What happened next?”

“The colonies expanded west, developing into the greatest god damn country in the world, eventually becoming the America that Americans know and love.”

“What about the British”

“They kinda went back to squabbling with the French. Lots of time went by, nowadays they are one of our closest allies. I guess familial bonds won over in the end.” He laughed.

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “It’s kind of just a joke. The British Empire was responsible for colonizing several large modern countries; Canada, Australia, New Zealand,” he rattled off. “...all children of Britannia. Most of whom managed to gain their independence peacefully.” He grinned. “I guess that made America the rebellious child.”

Twilight grinned as well. She liked history.

Shane set the device down on the crate. Retreating to the other side of the room where the rest of his things sat. He unclipped his helmet from his pack, placing it on his head and lowering the strange goggles onto his eyes. “Ha!” he exclaimed victoriously.

“What is it?”



“The shiny thing sparkles!” he smiled excitedly.

Shane beckoned her over. She stood trotting over to the corner. He unclasped the binoculars from the helmet, handing them to her and pointing at the boxy device.

She peeked through the binoculars, mimicking the human. They cast the room in a harsh greenish orange light. Every second or so the device would flash a blinding white light. She lowered the goggles. The device was not flashing. She could only see the steady rhythm of lights through the goggles.

“How is it doing that?” she asked bewildered.

Shane scratched his chin. “The flashing is just an infrared strobe, the cool thing about this little guy it can not only mark locations, but also transmit them. It’s not encrypted so you can only activate it when shit has seriously hit the fan. It’s a distress signal. I don’t know how it works, but it does. I’m going to have to fuck with it for awhile to even see if I can hook it up to transmit.” He stuffed the device and some other odds and ends into a pouch. “Come on, I wanna try and find a place to set up. Where’s your Rainbow friend. I’m going to need her for this.”

“You have an appointment in a few hours,” Twilight warned.

“It won’t take that long.”

~~~~~

Princess Luna’s room was located atop one of the highest towers in the castle. From her perch the entirety of the grounds could be seen along with a large section of Canterlot.

Luna snorted awake at the sound of knocking at her bedroom door. She blinked away what little sleep she had gotten, looking sourly out the window. The sun had only risen a few hours ago. Her servants knew better than to wake her for anything short of an emergency. Somepony better be dying. She thought darkly as she rolled out of bed, flexing her wings and stepping into a pair of bunny slippers.

She dragged herself to the thick door, opening it a crack with a magical tug.

Shane was there, with a small grin. She didn't bother hiding the surprise on her face. Usually she was the one who visited him. She was going to have to get used to the fact that he now could walk the castle at his leisure.

"Hey, Princess..." he eyeballed the dark alicorn. "You sleepin?"

"We are nocturnal. In case you had failed to notice," she replied her voice filled with sleepy annoyance.

"Well this will only take a second. Then you can go back to bed."

Luna sighed stepping aside and allowing him into the darkened room. Twilight and Rainbow Dash followed him in. She hadn't even seen them behind the human. What was this about? It was far too early for foolishness.

Shane walked over to the midnight blue drapes, pulling aside the thick fabric and ushering in a blinding torrent of light.

Luna screwed her eyes shut. "Really?" she asked letting her aggravation be known.

"Sorry. Just...two seconds." He found the door leading to the marble balcony. "I need to get on your roof."

"...why?" the lunar princess asked, not sure if she had heard correctly.

Shane stepped out on the balcony, Rainbow Dash right behind him. The pegasus immediately took to the air, hovering by the humans head as they surveyed the spire atop the princesses tower.

"Will that work?" Rainbow asked him curiously.

"That'll do." He nodded, tossing a little tan box to the pegasus. "Do your thing, Speedy."

Rainbow gave a salute and shot toward the golden spire, device in

hoof. Luna finally made her way after them, Twilight in tow. She was still blinking wildly, trying desperately to adjust to the sunlight.

“What are you doing, Shane?”

“You remember in ET when the kid comes home-” he started to answer before waving dismissively “...nevermind, you probably didn’t see that movie.”

Luna gave him a look of sour confusion. She craned her neck upward. The prismatic pegasus was attaching the device to the golden spire atop her tower. Securing it with a few plastic strips just like the human had shown her.

Once satisfied the device would not be coming down any time soon she flitted back toward the group, flying slow showboat-y circle around Shane’s head. “How’s that?”

“Looks good,” he appraised. “That’s all I needed. Thanks for the wings.”

She landed flexing her cyan feathers. “Yeah, they’re pretty useful sometimes. See you later guys, there’s a cumulous somewhere callin’ my name.”

“Bye, Rainbow. Thanks again.” Twilight called after her.

“Major, what are you doing and what have you done to our roof.”

“I put a shiny thing on it.”

She squinted at the little tan box. “It does not seem very shiny to us.”

“That’s what I said,” Twilight confirmed.

“Well it is.” He assured the mares.

“What is it for?”

“We use them to mark things,” he tried to explain. “It’s like...hey

look here, this is important.”

“How? Who could see something so small?”

“They’d see it,” he promised. “You can’t see it without special equipment but it pulses. Sending out a signal like a beacon.”

Several alarms went off in Luna’s brain. Beacons beckoned things... things she was not entirely sure she wanted visiting. Was it really a good idea to let the human set up a beacon on her castle? Especially right on top of her room?

“Who are the signals for?”

“Anyone with sufficient equipment to pick up on it really. Humans ideally. I mean let’s be honest in all objective realities you will never see another human again for the rest of eternity. But on the other end of things, if it happened once, it could happen again. And if by some immeasurably impossible chance it does, and I’m not here to play ball. That little doo-dad will get their attention. It will tell them you’re friendly... and not to kill you.”

Luna’s jaw fell open. She was at a complete loss as to what to be feeling. Was there ever even a risk of that!? On one hoof Shane had erected a protective bubble around her home, but on the other he had also introduced her to a whole new host of worries she would have been perfectly happy without.

“I’ll show you what it looks like once the sun goes down,” he offered.

Luna just shook her head, the sleepiness in her bones demanding that this nonsense be dealt with later.

“Fine,” she conceded, her sleepiness finally winning over her curiosity.

Shane bumped Twilight with his hip. “Come on. I gotta talk to your mom real quick.”

“Princess Celestia ISN’T MY MOM!”

“Celestia should be in the middle of her court hearings if I am any judge of time... which I am,” Luna assured as she hopped back up upon her massive indigo bed. “You will have to wait until tonight, unless the situation is urgent.”

Shane frowned but didn't argue. “It can wait,” he muttered as he headed to ward the door. “Goodnight, princess.”

“It's daytime...” she muttered from her pillow.

“Figure of speech,” he retorted sharply. “They never learn,” he complained to the unicorn at his side.

Luna rolled her eyes as she settled back into an unpleasant sleep.

~~~~~

Twilight flicked her tail back and forth impatiently while the human burned through a cigarette outside the dungeon complex. She wanted to go back inside and continue her interview about Shane's home world, but the human had insisted he be allowed a smoke break. They only had about an hour before she had to take Shane to his next exam.

The human happily puffed away at cigarette while eyeing the two stoic guards posted out front. “So...how come they only let white guys in the service? Does discrimination based on fur color constitute racism?” he mused to himself.

“It's a spell,” Twilight explained from her perch upwind of the human. “The armor is enchanted to change the color of their coats.”

“How do you tell them apart?” he stared at the face of one of the guards. The stallion remained perfectly impassive, but a small bead of sweat could be seen trailing down his cheek.

“You don't. That's the point,” Celestia pointed out as she approached. Her gentle golden aura plucked the cigarette from Shane's fingers and she proceeded to stamp it out with her golden shod hoof.

Shane grinned at the solar alicorn as he replaced the stolen

cigarette with another. "For every one that falls, another will take its place." he added as he twirled the cigarette in his fingers hypnotically.

"You'll run out eventually," she noted just as smartly.

The grin slowly melted off his face as he realized how right she was. He had a healthy supply of nicotine now, but once it was gone... it was gone... like forever-that's- all-folks gone. The depressing reality of the situation reared its ugly head once more, and every terribly comforting puff only brought him closer to that dreadful day. "Aren't you supposed to be at work?" he asked icily, suddenly no longer happy to see the princess.

"I convened early. One of the benefits of being my own boss," she replied.

Shane nudged one of the guards with an elbow. "Your tax dollars at work." He gestured toward the princess. The guard remained impassive as the alicorn rolled her eyes.

~~~~~

"Just relax," the stallion said soothingly over the intercom.

"I am relaxed!" Shane shot back at the disembodied voice, sounding anything but. "...Is this the test or am I waiting for the test?" he asked the voice. He was sitting alone in a fairly plain room, and had been for several minutes. The voice gave no answer.

. There were a few small chairs, a blocky table, and a two way mirror. The room was otherwise devoid of decoration.

Shane sat in one of the too small chairs, tapping his boot on the plain linoleum floor in a desperate attempt to pass the time. It wasn't long before a small unicorn wheeled in an equally small cart. On top of which was a simple puzzle box and several simple shaped blocks.

The human eyeballed the puzzle for several drawn out seconds as the mare made her leave. It was little more than a toy designed to help foals with basic motor skills ...and by the look the human gave

the mirror on the far wall...he knew it.

"It's just a starting point, Shane," Twilight's voice sounded over the intercom. "I know it seems patronizing but we have to start at the beginning."

Shane let his shoulders sag and began plugging the shapes into the appropriate holes, completing the basic task in a matter of seconds.

Several ponies in the observation room began furiously scrabbling on pads of paper. The mare retrieved the completed test, and wheeled in another. This one was similar only focusing on coordinating color rather than shape. The human had it finished before the mare left the room.

The tests grew in complexity as time went on. Simple puzzles and games were replaced with more difficult brainteasers and association. All the while the observation room was abuzz with some of the academy's most gifted behavioral and psychological minds, all hysterically noting everything from the time it took to complete the puzzles to the fashion through which he did so.

He did well for the most part grasping test centered in basic machines, physical attributes, and problem solving. He however struggled in tests that focused on knowledge of pony culture or society. It was to be expected but it was still insightful to see him trying to reason out pony family dynamics, or matching gender roles.

He seemed strangely bemused when the more mechanical puzzle machines would offer rewards. Usually a piece of hard candy or little bauble. Usually just something to prove that the test had been successfully completed. He had amassed a small pile of treats.

The nurse produced the next test. It was almost exactly the same as the last. A glass box that required specific keys to unlock a series of latches in a specific order. A simple task once you made a few trial and error guesses.

The notable distinction, however, was the prize. The little piece of caramel had been replaced with a bright red Marlboro box.

The human searched his pockets frantically, only to realize he had in fact been pick-pocketed. He turned to the mirrored window with a look of explicit annoyance.

“Are you serious? Have you sunk this low?”

“Please proceed with the test, Major,” Celestia’s disembodied voice sounded over the intercom with poorly concealed mirth.

“bitch...” he murmured as he picked up the small brass keys, preparing to repeat the test.

The first key touched the lock only for a small spark to jump from the lock and send a small electrical current up the human’s arm. “FUCK!” The key fell to the floor as he shook his hand out. “Are you kidding me!?” he shouted at the mirror.

When no one answered him, he turned back to the puzzle. How to unlock the glass box without setting off the charge. He tried a different key, only to be similarly shocked. He reexamined the cart, noticing a new addition to the seemingly random bits that he could use to solve the puzzle.

~~~~~

“He found the oven mitt,” Twilight noted, somewhat proudly.

The human jammed his hand into the thick fabric glove. It was designed with hooves in mind but she figured he could still pinch the key through the fabric well enough to finish the test.

“He understands electrical conductivity,” one of the mares in the observation room noted quietly. Twilight wasn’t exactly surprised. Based on Shane’s gadgets and devices Human knowledge of electricity was clearly eons ahead of their own. But she kept her comments to herself.

The human went back to the glass box. Twilight seemed rather confused that he ignored the small tray of brass keys. “What’s he doing?”

The human cocked his elbow back and punched through the roof of



the box, sending shards of safety glass across the floor. He seized the cigarettes and routinely flipped off the mirrored observation window with one hand and grabbed his crotch with the other. "Write that down!" he said smugly.

Twilight smacked a hoof to her face, as Celestia let out a somewhat tired sigh of frustration.

~~~~~

The solar alicorn shut the door to her chamber, casting the soundproofing spell that seemed to have become the norm these days. The secrecy was becoming tiresome. The human was safely back in his room most likely sleeping. Luna was would be convening the court shortly, and had agreed to meet them. The princess had a few precious hours to herself before dinner. Celestia relaxed into one of the cushions by her fireplace.

Twilight settled into a cushion opposite a small table.

"What was it you needed to talk to me about?" The solar princess asked directly, though not unkindly.

The purple unicorn shifted uncomfortably on her own pillow. "Well...it's not really something I need to talk about as much as something I think you'll want to see."

Celestia raised a curious eyebrow as Twilight produced the human's music playing device. Twilight bumped and tapped on the alien screen several times before telekinetically scooting the device across the table toward the solar diarch.

Celestia pulled the device under her nose. The screen displayed one word. "Pictures".

Celestia looked at Twilight. The unicorn nodded encouragingly, although the look on her face was troubled.

Celestia tapped the icon and the device whirled with activity, filling with small square images, neatly arrayed in rows of four. Most of the images were too small to see any fine detail, but it was more than obvious that they were snapshots the human had either taken

or collected throughout his life.

Celestia jaw relaxed as the reality hit her. “Oh my word...” she whispered. She ran the tip of her hoof across the screen. Rows and rows of digital photographs scrolled by. “There are hundreds...” she idly commented.

Twilight nodded. She hesitantly reached across the table toward the device. She traced a purple hoof across the polished screen, pausing for a moment before poking one of the little pictures.

~~~~~

He was pretty sure it was asleep. It wasn't making any noise anymore. Princess Celestia had deposited the human in the cell before departing to do whatever it was princesses did. Auburn Sky rolled his shoulders, adjusting the heavy golden plate armor.

“What are you doing after your shift?”

“I'm gotta go down town. Gonna head over to Star Shimmer's place and see if she wants to have dinner,” Auburn Sky replied with a casual smile.

“You're not going to come have a drink with your ol pal?” the other guard asked with a hint of feigned offense.”

“It's barely past noon, Windy,” he chuckled.

“And I've been on duty since like two this morning. Besides... the guard tavern is open twenty-four-seven.”

Sky shook his head. It was true the castle watering hole was open at all hours. It was one of the few benefits of being in the guard. No matter what patrol schedule you were on, you had a place to go relax after your shift. “Sorry bud, I haven't seen my marefriend in almost a week. You'll have to find someone else to get hammered with.”

There was an almost inaudible yelp from the other guard. Sky turned his head just in time to see Trade Wind's now unmanned spear fall to the ground with a clatter as the armored guard was

yanked into the human's cell.

Sky heart began to rocket as panic began to set in. He jumped into the padded cell after his fellow guard. The human was holding the horrified stallion by his breastplate with a look of exhilarated desperation on his face.

“Where is it!?” it demanded hysterically.

~~~~~

Celestia had lost count of how many times she had swiped the tip of her hoof across the screen. Luna watched with rapt attention over her shoulder. Countless snapshots scrolled before her eyes like an extensive digital album.

Much of what she saw was incomprehensible. She had learned only two things for certain; human foals were positively adorable, and the Shane in these pictures was a very different person from the one she knew.

It had almost become routine, every time she decided she had a respectable grip on the human condition, some nuance or quirk would quickly remind her that he was not of this world and there was an entire galaxy of information about humanity that she, even with Shane's full and uninhibited cooperation, would never have.

“Still adrift,” Luna murmured idly as she swiped the screen once more.

Celestia sighed in agreement. They had finally cycled through the pictures. There had been far too many to count and the battery was getting low. Twilight filled a stack of parchment with questions. The pile was thick enough to rival most dictionaries. Luna dabbed the screen once more.

The image of Shane holding the human foal filled the screen. The human behind the pair was female without question. Without Shane here to explain she had no way of really knowing if she was the mother of the child... or if Shane was the father.

A pang of emotion tightened in her chest. She wasn't quite certain if

it stemmed from sadness or pity. She supposed it had always been possible the human had left a family behind. But given his ... "solitary" personality she had never given the thought much credibility.

"Do you think we can make use of this?" Luna asked tentatively.

Celestia sighed dejectedly. "Yes and no," she offered. "This can help us understand human society, but I doubt we will be able to infer anything concrete. Without context these photographs are nothing but fragments of information."

"I fear he may believe we intruded on his privacy," Luna noted quietly.

"He gave us access to this willingly... if not somewhat indirectly," she defended, felling slightly unsure about the technicality.

Luna nodded, conceiting to the fact. "Even if he does, the odds are those insights will be meaningless to us. I sometimes have difficulty understanding him as it stands, asking him to communicate the intricacies of his entire society through mere words is all but impossible."

"Unless you know a better way to engender social understanding, it is the best option we have," The solar alicorn sighed.

Luna nodded half-heartedly her thoughts already leading her elsewhere. There were always less obvious ways to understand the workings of the mind. She had only flirted with the idea until recently, slowly gathering mental justifications. After all... the best way to truly understand something was to experience it oneself.

~~~~~

"Oh, Gods, we're so getting banished for this..." Auburn Sky muttered dreadfully as his little group rounded corners and hallways, doing their best to dodge the sporadic patrols.

"It'll be fine. Get me close you two can dip and I'll magically forget you two ever had any hand in this," Shane soothed eagerly.

“We didn’t have a hand in this!” Trade Wind hissed at the human.

“Hooves... whatever.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Trade protested.

“I know what you meant. You’re worrying too much. When we get caught you can tell her I forced you to do it.”

“You did force us to do it!” Auburn Sky assured.

“I did not,” he insisted. “I’m just... embellishing the parameters of your job. You two can only be credited with the resolute fulfillment of your duty by escorting me and making sure I don’t get lost or in trouble.”

“No THIS ...” Trade Wind gestured grandly with his forehooves, “What you are doing right now. THIS IS you getting into trouble. We have already failed to keep you out of trouble because you are literally getting into the trouble as we speak.”

The human ‘pffft-ed’ with a sour patronizing look. “This is not trouble. You don’t even know trouble. Trust me. I will let you know when the trouble happens. We have at least twenty to thirty minutes until someone realizes I’m gone, then another fifteen or so until they track down Luna, another five to wake her up, then I’d say about ten to fifteen until they actually get here. THAT is when the trouble happens. And you two will be long gone by then.”

“Why do they need Princess Luna to come get you?” Auburn Sky asked, for the moment forgetting the fact that his career was likely going to be ruined.

“They don’t. But she’s probably the only one that knows where I am.”

“...How?”

Shane showed off a black leather band wrapped around his wrist with a silver clasp. “This,” he said dryly.

“...Your bracelet told her?”

"It's Luna's," he said sourly eyeing the band. "The little princess may not be the brightest crayon in the box but she's not so stubborn that she'd fight tooth and nail over a fashion accessory. It's probably magic, and I'm pretty sure she's LoJacked it." The two just stared at the human blankly. "She's tracking me."

"Oh." The two said in unison.

"If you know she's using it to track you why are you wearing it?" Auburn asked as they turned another corner.

He shrugged. "Why not? I don't plan on running off. In all honesty the only thing that bothers me is the principle of the thing. If she had been like 'hey can I use this thing to track you,' I'd probably have been like 'sure'. But she tried to sneakily force it on me so now I'm just going to use it to fuck with her. Like...I don't know... flush it down a toilet and watch her try to follow it. Or something," he waved a hand dismissively, "I haven't really decided yet."

"So you like...enjoy aggravating infinitely powerful alicorns?"

"Little bit...yeah," he admitted easily.

"Why?"

"I don't get Netflix here."

Neither stallion bothered asking what that meant. They were close now, they were eager to deposit the troublesome biped off at the tavern and finish their shift in peace. The inevitable court martials could wait until tomorrow.

~~~~~

The older stallion sipped on his tankard as he nibbled on a hayburger. He had a little corner booth all to himself. A few newspapers were folded neatly on the table. Nothing glaringly interesting caught his attention. Overall it was the typical business, gossip, weather, stocks, and personals.

Aegis folded the newspaper and sipped his drink. It was turning out to be a fairly uneventful day off. As busy as he was with the guard

he was certainly looking forward to it. But for an unmarried middle aged stallion, there wasn't much for him to do in Canterlot other than frequent bars and eat greasy food. He often wished for more time off, but whenever he got some, he found himself oddly at a loss for activity and more than enough just returned to work early.

The double door to the bar swung inward causing the stallion to do a genuine double take. Sure as daylight stood the source of almost all of Aegis' problems lately. It would seem even on his day off, the human was hell bound to make his life complicated. He stood in the doorstep devoid of armor and blouse. Armed only with the large handgun strapped to his thigh

Aegis wasn't the only one to take notice of the newcomer. The entire bar had gone quiet. All manner of off-duty guard personnel were staring at the strange biped with poorly veiled confusion or concern.

Shane waved a few fingers around. "Uh...Carry on, gents."

"Major." The human's eyes snapped toward Aegis confused and alert. "Get over here." He eyeballed the commander for several seconds frowning.

"Do I know you?" he said somewhat icily.

Aegis was confused for a moment before he realized the human had never seen him out of uniform. His coat and mane were back to their original colors. "It's Aegis."

Realization crossed the human's face followed by amusement. "You look different naked."

The stallion rolled his eyes. "Just sit down." Shane briefly eyed the waiting bar pony with obvious longing but slid into the booth anyway, sitting opposite the stallion. "What are you doing here?"

"Presumably the same thing you're doing," he answered obviously.

"Does Celestia know you're here?"

"....yyyes."

“That’s a lie,” he noted casually.

“She said I’m free to roam,” he asserted. “And this is where the roaming took me.”

“She also said lay low.”

“Do I look like I’m running down the halls screaming or something? I just wanna sit in a dark room and rot my brain on cheap whiskey. Why is that so much to ask.”

Aegis considered the human for a moment. “You better get started then.”

“It’s not lik- what?” he interrupted himself.

“You better get drinking. Sounds like you’re running on borrowed time as it is.”

Shane stared at the Guard Commander for several seconds with narrow suspicious eyes. “You’re not going to try and stop me?”

“The Princess did say you were allowed to wander. Besides...It’s my day off.”

Shane stepped toward the bar, turned and looked cautiously at the stallion, as if expecting him to jump up and run off to snitch.

Aegis just picked up his paper and continued to read.

Apparently realizing he was not being lured into some malty fermented trap. The human scampered over to the bar.

He returned with a tray stacked with little glasses filled with a dark amber liquid. He sat down across from Aegis with a grin.

“Are those all for you?”

Shane made a non-committal noise and examined his plate of shots then looking to the stallion critically. Before carefully selecting one and placing it in front of the Commander and one before himself.



"I don't drink whiskey."

"You have to. Or you're insulting my people and I will be forced to duel you for the offense," he warned in a deceptively serious tone.

Aegis realized he was possibly lying but ran with it anyway. "Fine."

Shane smiled and grabbed the stallion's hoof turning it and placing the shot in the center.

"To nightmares." he toasted cheerily.

He lifted his own and downed it. Aegis groaned and did the same giving in he tossed back his own. Shuddering at the taste while Shane sucked air through his teeth.

"You were enlisted at some point weren't you?" Aegis said, not really asking.

"What gave me away?" Shane chuckled not sounding very surprised.

"Your attitude... basically half officer, half juvenile delinquent."

Shane started laughing at the stallion's description. "That's the best thing I heard all day," he muttered still giggling as he selected another drink. "You're clever. I like you."

"Am I wrong?"

"No. Once upon a time it was Lance Corporal Doran. Spent four years in the reserves as an enlisted man, Applied for OCS after our first deployment, got in, went, graduated, went active, deployed again, got back, got out, went home... six months later some very spooky government types showed up at my house and talked my dumb ass into this retarded adventure." He waved his hand around generically. Shane tossed another shot back "And now here I am... drinking whiskey in a castle with magical horses." He chuckled in that same perversely depressed way. "One thing led to another, Right?"

Aegis sniffed at that, not terribly flattered, but interested

nonetheless. He wondered if even Celestia had heard such a comprehensive summary of his life. All it took was a tray of shots. Maybe he should suggest the Princess rethink her interview technique.

Shane set another glass in front of the stallion. An odd thought occurred to him. "How did you pay for these?" Aegis asked suddenly curious.

"Tab," he explained simply.

"Whose?"

"A certain lunar alicorn."

"Princess Luna doesn't have a tab here?" he noted plainly.

"She does now," he grinned.

Aegis shook his head. "I'm sure she'll be thrilled."

"I'll pay her back. I just gotta find somebody to exchange dollars for ...sugarcubes or whatever ponies use for currency."

"The term you're looking for is Bits."

"Of course it is," he muttered into his glass.

"Well if ever there was a time she could afford it, its now. Considering you dumped a couple trillion bits worth of alien technology in her lap."

"That's one way to look at it. Do they have food here?"

"Bar food," he shrugged.

"Bar food is food."

"Here," Aegis nosed over his menu. He was already done with it anyway.

Shane fingered through the menu. "Is a hayburger like a cheeseburger?"

“It’s got cheese on it if that’s what you’re asking,” Aegis noted as he sipped his own glass shuddering slightly at the burn of the stiff glass.

“No. I’m actually sort of clinging to the shred of hope that it’s made with cow and the “hay” thing is just a pony gimmick.”

“There’s no cow in it.” Aegis frowned disapprovingly at the carnivorousness.

Shane pushed the menu away, apparently no longer hungry.

“Will you survive without meat?” He asked genuinely somewhat curious.

“I guess,” he sneered, “Surviving would be about the extent of it though.”

Aegis was thoughtful for a short moment. “We occasionally entertain meat eating guests. It is not impossible to get by any means, but it’s also not exactly commonplace. Now that the Griffon PM is here, I imagine it will be much easier to justify an order.”

“I knew that guy was going to come in handy,” Shane smiled hopeful at the prospect of a potentially carnivorous meal.

Shane put another glass in front of the older stallion. “Hurry up. I’m drinking on stolen time.”

~~~~~

Aegis stacked an empty glass. With his, now considerably less coordinated hooves. He didn’t usually make a habit of drinking this much, yet for some reason the glasses continued to pile up around he and the Marine. He began finding it difficult to accurately tell how much time had actually passed.

He looked over at the human. He was currently in the middle of a very animated drunken story. The human probably had near eighty pounds on the stallion but from the flush of his cheeks and the slightly slurred movements, it wasn’t exactly hard to realize the human was pretty toasted himself. Aegis didn’t understand a lot of

the nuances to the human's story, but the general message was mostly clear. It didn't take a genius to figure out what he meant by "exceedingly talented exotic dancers".

The human sat back in his booth and lit a cigarette. No one seemed to care. "Anyway. That was the third drunkest I've ever been in my life."

"SHANE!" Twilight shouted from the doorway.

The human winced and ducked as if something had been hurled at him. He slowly turned to see the fuming young mare bearing down on him with the full brunt of her angry amethyst eyes.

"Heeey kiddo, how are you?"

Twilight examined the scene. Several dozen tiny empty glasses littered the table. Shane's cheeks were slightly flushed and his balance upon the pony sized booth was not exactly up to par.

"Are you drunk?" she asked almost tiredly.

"Uuummm..." Shane surveyed the graveyard of empty glasses on the table, then back to Twilight, chuckling slightly. "I mean...I certainly wouldn't call myself sober," he admitted chuckling.

"Ugh." Twilight rolled her eyes as she lit her horn. She fished around in her saddlebag before pulling out one of Shane's radios.

"That's mine," he protested the commandeering of his things.

"We borrowed them. This is your fault anyway." Twilight donned the headset with no small amount of trouble. She finally got the device to sit properly while Shane watched with thinly veiled amusement. "Princess? ...Princess Its Twilight, can you hear me?"

"Yoink," Shane reached over and plucked the headset from the unicorn.

"Hey!" Twilight protested back.

Shane ignored her, holding the earpiece to his head with one hand

while stiff-arming the small unicorn with the other.

“We hear you, Twilight have you had any luck locating the Major?” Luna’s synthetic voice broke over the speaker.

Shane depressed a switch with his thumb. “Uh, that’s a negative there, Big Blue. And I must say, if he’s as allusive as he his handsome then I’m afraid the chances of us finding him are slim to none. How copy over?”

“Ah. Hello, Major. We are pleased you are not lost somewhere on the grounds.”

“Aw thanks, Princess. I missed you too. I hope you weren’t looking for too long.” Shane fingered the leather band around his wrist. “However did you know I’d be here?”

“T’was actually the first place we checked. You have expressed genuine interest in only one real thing during your time here. It seemed the most logical place to start.” In her defense, it was actually a pretty reasonable thought. “Celestia is on her way to collect you for dinner. Twilight Sparkle will wait with you until she arrives. We shall see you soon.”

“Can’t wait,” Shane gave Twilight his radio back. “Celestia’s coming to collect us.” He informed the younger mare with a hint of distaste. “Which means...” he slid out of the booth. “...last call.” He pointed a finger at the commander who was still sitting silently. “Whadda you want?”

“Whiskey... neat.”

The human nodded approvingly. He cocked an eyebrow at Twilight.

“I’m not thirsty,” she assured the waiting human.

Shane frowned at her. “You have to.”

“Why?”

Shane turned to Aegis. “Tell her the thing.”

“If you refuse a drink you’re insulting his people... and you’ll uh...” he twirled his hoof around in inebriated thought “...duel for it.” Clearly the human ritual had claimed his sobriety as well.

A spark of curious suspicion entered the studious unicorn’s mind. He could very well be lying. But if not she had inadvertently stumbled upon an interesting facet of human customs.

“Water, please.” Twilight caved.

Shane stared at her as if she had ordered a cup of frogs. “You’ll get whiskey and like it,” Shane noted before scampering off towards the bar.

Twilight turned toward the Commander. “Do you think he’s being serious?”

Aegis pursed his lips and shrugged as he began to giggle.

~~~~~

Celestia poked her head into the darkened establishment. She didn’t come here particularly often. It was intended to be the guard’s retreat from their duties, namely herself. It seemed a bit counter productive, not to mention somewhat unseemly, for a princess to linger around the tavern.

The solar alicorn scanned the dimly lit bar, her quarry wasn’t difficult to track. It was two feet taller than everything else in the room and flanked by a young purple unicorn mare.

“Princess!” the massive stallion behind the bar exclaimed spurring a massive movement in the sleepy and drunken military stallions to quickly stand and bow in the sudden presence of their monarch.

Celestia winced as several went crashing over their own hooves or each other in their varying levels of inebriated haste. She held up a hoof hoping to calm the room of stallions from their frenzy. “There is no need, I assure you. Please continue, my little ponies.” She smiled sweetly as she eyeballed the human in his booth. “I am merely here to collect a stray.”

Shane clacked an empty glass against the table from his booth in the corner. "Do whatever you want," he declared assuredly spreading his arms before folding his arms on the table and resting his head smugly atop them. "I've already won..."

Celestia approached the table. "Hello your, highness," Aegis smiled as he lowered his head.

"Commander," Celestia greeted. "I am sorry you had to deal with this on your day off. Were you two having fun?"

"Oh it's no trouble really," he assured. "Turns out the Major here was a prior enlisted stallion like myself."

Celestia recoiled slightly. "Is that so?"

Shane started giggling from his nestled position in his arms. "... Mustang." Shane began to laugh to himself.

"How much has he had to drink?" Celestia smiled as she watched the human lose it over his own joke.

"Well beyond what I would consider safe for most any equine," Aegis laughed while Twilight shot pointed angry glances at the human.

"Why do you do this to yourself my little human?" Celestia asked somewhat sadly eyeing the inebriate man.

Shane rested an elbow on the table and leaned his cheek against his palm. He gave Celestia a tired smirk. "You ever stop and think maybe, just maybe, I just like drinking? And that I'm really not as complicated as you wanna think I am." He stared into the alicorn's eyes.

Celestia had her doubts but decided this was not the time for this conversation, as she offered her hoof to the inebriated Marine. He gladly took it, carefully avoiding her golden shoes. Celestia heaved and pulled the large human to his feet where he stood wobbling by her side, sending her a thankful smile.

"Are you alright?" she asked only slightly amused by his grinning

drunken state.

“Yep!” he declared confidently.

“Do you remember how to get there?”

“Not a chance in hell,” he admitted still smiling. “I assumed you were my escort.”

“Well we have some time to kill if you would like to get cleaned up first? I’d also like to talk to you about something if you don’t mind.”

“Am I in trouble?” he asked suspiciously.

“No.”

“Then I would love to have a talk with you about something,” he assured.

“Splendid!” she smiled. “Twilight, we will meet you in the dining room shortly.”

Twilight nodded happily as she hopped out of the booth.

Shane reached out and ruffled the young unicorn’s mane in an affectionate farewell. Twilight huffed and tried to shake the tangles out of her hair but smiled all the same. She said her goodbyes and departed through the double doors.

Shane crossed his arms and leaned against the alicorn as they watched Twilight leave. Celestia looked back at the human. “Shall we then?”

“Sure,” he propped himself back up, swaying a bit. Shane turned to the Commander with a casual smile. “Sir, it was pleasant speaking words with you.” Shane saluted the (possibly) just as inebriated stallion. “I look forward to this inspection.”

Aegis returned his salute as well as he could in his state. “As do I, Major. I’m sure it will be \*hic\*...educational for the both of us.”

Shane smiled amicably at whatever plans the two had concocted



while left to their own musings. Celestia would find out from one of them when there was less alcohol in play. “Come along, Major,” Celestia prodded as she turned and started towards the doors.

~~~~~

Shane spilled squintingly out behind the solar alicorn, taking a few wobbling steps into the much more brightly lit hallway and nearly tripped over his own boots.

Celestia tried not to giggle at the wobbly movements of the human. “This way, Major. Just try not to fall.”

“Please,” he droned. “This is like some tutorial shit right here.” He pointed a finger up and down himself.

Celestia rolled her eyes. “Just keep a hand on my withers. I don’t need you taking a dive down a flight of stairs.”

Shane stared blankly for a second before slowly reaching over and resting a tentative hand above the dock of her tail and raising a curious eyebrow at the alicorn, as if requesting an affirmation.

Celestia fought back the initial urge to laugh at the human’s uncomfortable confusion. “Shane...” she started gently, “That is my rear. I said withers.”

“I don’t know what withers are!” Shane defended embarrassedly as he snatched his arms away and folded them along his chest.

Celestia giggled at the non-alcohol related blush in the human’s cheeks. She seized his hand in a small cloud of golden astral magic and guided it to rest between her shoulders. “Withers,” she stated plainly. “Understand?” She asked teasingly.

Shane frowned at the alicorn. “You could have just said ‘my back’ in the first place and saved us a lot of time.”

“No,” She corrected guiding his hand further down her spine. “That is my back.”

“This is not anatomy time!” Shane ripped his hands away from

Celestia and her magic, flailing the golden aura away. “And I can walk just fine! Let’s go!”

Shane stormed down the hallway nearly running over a potted plant and barley managing not to fall on his face.

Celestia followed after the flustered human. “Don’t be embarrassed, Shane,” she teased further as she caught up to him checking the tipsy human with her hip. “And flattered though I may be I am still easily fifty times your age.”

“Shut up!”

“What was it you’ve been saying? Didn’t even buy me dinner first?”

“I’ll seriously kill you. You think I won’t but I will.”

~~~~~

Celestia presided over the meal at the head of the table along with Luna. The elements of harmony sat to their left with Shane nestled safely between Twilight and Rarity. The Griffon Prime minister seated opposite them along with Shining Armor.

Magneus sat across from the eyeing human. The creature still seemed to have an unusual fascination with the griffon. The occasional elbow-nudgings of Celestia’s protégé seemed to have little to no deterring effect on his occasional glances.

Magneus did his best not to let it trouble him. The human was merely curious. From what it had told him there were no griffons where he was from. It would likely be most akin to seeing something from a fairy tale. Surely a strange experience for anyone.

Shane doodled over the napkin with a pink crayon cheerily provided by Pinkie Pie. “It’s mostly almost close to that, sort of,” Shane said definitively to the unicorn mare hanging over his shoulder. Rarity watched with fascinated, if not confused, interest. “It’s not the right number of buttons I don’t think,” he mumbled somewhat to himself. “I can’t remember.”

Although the human’s artistic skill left something to be desired, she

was impressed by what he could recreate from memory, especially in his noticeably tipsy state. She was looking at a working doodle of a dress uniform.

Shane tucked the crayon behind his ear and offered the napkin doodle to the fashion forward unicorn. "I'll find a real picture somewhere. Stop by my office one day. I'll dig one up for you."

"That would be lovely, Major. But I wouldn't want to be a bother," she answered politely.

"It's really not much trouble. I'd actually appreciate some semi normal company. The princess parade gets old pretty fast," he complained.

"We are sitting right here, human," Luna droned grumpily.

He twisted in his seat and eyeballed the alicorn. "So you are," he noted.

"Dost thou not appreciate our enrapturing visits and conversations?" Her smile was threateningly sweet.

"Mayhaps if thee did not lapse haphazard into thine Shakespearian tongues, then we would not have to waste insufferable amounts of time on dialectic interpretation."

Luna's smile disappeared and a rosy blush spread on her cheeks. "You mock us," she stated simply.

"I do," he confirmed.

"Shining Armor! Defend your princesses' honor immediately!" Luna declared across the table.

The stallion looked up from his food confused at having been called out so suddenly.

"Oh no, you're going to send Captain Cub Scout after me?" Shane chuckled. "Is he bringing his own body bag or should I go out and get him one?"

“Hey!” Shining said angrily.

“Ooooh fight!” Rainbow Dash cheered eagerly.

“No one is fighting anyone!” Twilight butted in.

“She’s right,” Shane admitted sourly. “It wouldn’t even be a real fight. Already beat his ass once.”

“WHAT?! You snuck up behind me and clubbed me in the head! You didn’t beat me at anything.”

“I beat you at sneaking up and clubbing people,” he said confidently.

“If it were a fair fight there wouldn’t be enough of you left to fill a teacup.”

Shane perked up excitedly. Suddenly very focused on the stallion across the table. “What?! You’ve never killed anyone in your life, and you’re gonna start with the big dog?” Shane patted his chest, “Yeah fuckin right, Tinkerbell.”

“Shane!” Twilight began warningly.

Shane twisted in his seat toward Celestia. “Hey princess, you might wanna start recruiting another boot ass captain cuz I’m about to murder your boy here.”

“You better not,” she said maternally. “Cadence would be very upset with me if I let that happen.”

“Who’s Cadence?”

“My wife!” Shining shouted.

“You’re straight?!” Shane asked, flabbergasted.

~~~~~

The human settled on one of Celestia’s many lush pillows. He buried his face into the soft fabric. Celestia could only assume the

copious drinking earlier was catching up with him. He held it together throughout dinner pretty well until he started picking fights with Shining Armor. The human was undoubtedly trying to goad the stallion. His violent ego and Shining Armor's sense of honor would inevitably clash. She would have to be extra watchful of the human around her soldiers.

Shane rolled over into a sitting position. Celestia curled herself on her own cushion across a small sitting table. "Tea?" His eyes were already low. She doubted this discussion would last very long without the added caffeine.

"No, thank you," he declined. "I'm not really a tea drinker."

"Would you prefer something else?" The princess offered.

"Coffee would be amazing."

She smiled. As she levitated a small tea set for the two of them. She heated the water for her tea and poured a small package of instant coffee into a mug for the human. It wasn't as good as the home brewed stuff, but she doubted he would complain.

She levitated the steaming cup over to the human who accepted it gratefully. He took a hearty gulp of the liquid despite the temperature. "So what's on your mind, princess?" he asked finally cutting to the chase.

Celestia straightened her wings, deciding to be blunt about it. She produced the human's music pad. She slid the device across the table so the human could see the picture on the screen.

Shane stared at the digital photo for several seconds. His face lost its smirk and his shoulders lowered somewhat. The little screen showed a picture of himself cradling a human child while a woman with dark blonde hair leaned over them smiling sweetly.

Shane sighed pulling the device closer. "Forgot these were on here..." he said quietly.

"Your family?" she asked quietly noticing the shift in his mood.

He nodded with a small sad smile. He tapped the screen twice. The image zoomed over the picture of the woman in the back.

“She was... your mate?”

Shane huffed loudly. “No, Jesus” he laughed immediately. “My uh...my older sister. The kid is her daughter... My niece.”

Celestia seized the information with interest. “What was her name?”

“Kylie. Older by three years. The tyke in pink is Maggie.”

“How old is she?”

Shane rubbed the back of his head thoughtfully. “She’s gotta be coming up on four or five by now.” He stared at the picture longingly as if somehow hoping he might be able to simply fall through it and be there again. “She may not have been mine but I sure as fuck loved her like she was. Kylie would leave her with me a lot. She and her husband both worked and I was coasting on deployment money. It was an... interesting time in my life.”

She tried to maintain her composure. She didn’t recall the human ever admitting to love anything. “You miss them.” It wasn’t a question.

“Every day.” Shane answered regardless.

“You told us you didn’t have a family,” she noted sounding somewhat hurt.

“I didn’t know you,” he answered simply.

Celestia regarded the human once more. “Why not tell us?”

Shane scoffed. “And say what? What about me sharing my personal life with you improved my situation?”

“It wouldn’t have,” she admitted somberly. “But having a friend to talk to might make things more bearable in the mean time.”

“I don’t need friends, Princess.”

“Major, I think I have hardly met a creature more painfully in need of friendship than you.”

Shane scoffed tiredly, regarding the alicorn with yet another amused gaze. She offered a kind smile.

He shook his head. Standing up, he plucked the pad off the table. “Fine. But this isn’t going to become an everyday thing.” He grabbed his cushion and began to drag it over to the alicorn who watched with amused confusion. “And you better not take this shit for granted. The only reason this is happening is I’m still pretty toasted and you got me feeling all nostalgic.”

Celestia nodded, careful not to let too much of her excitement show. “Fair enough. I was really hoping you could explain some things to me. I’m afraid much of what we saw was...difficult to understand.”

He dropped his pillow next to Celestia’s before lying across it and resting his head against the alicorn herself. “Get comfy. This will probably take a while.” He adjusted himself on the pillow so the princess could see the screen in his hands.

Celestia smiled giddily at the human. She rested her head by his shoulder nestling herself in place. Shane didn’t protest.

Shane tapped the screen, bringing the image back up. This one was just of his infant niece.

“What is she like?” she asked curiously.

“She was a brave little thing. Tough as shit I swear. I had her in my backyard once and she was just starting to walk and she fell in the grass and scuffed up her arm real good. She didn’t shed a single tear. Just stood up and brushed it off,” Shane spoke proudly puffing out his chest proudly.

Celestia laughed, unsure if she were laughing at the story or at the fact that Shane was the one telling it. “She’s adorable.”

He swiped a finger across the screen.

"That's your father isn't it?" she asked at the new image

"Yep."

"You look like him."

"So I've been told," he smirked

"Was he a Marine too?"

"No. I'm a first generation jarhead," he mused. "Dad was very against the idea of me enlisting. Wanted me to get a job that didn't involve bombs and gunfire. Almost got into a fistfight over it actually until my sister stepped in."

"She sounds important to you."

"She was my best friend in the world. She cheered me up when I was down, she stitched me up when I bled. Took care of me when I was sick. I swear to god its scary how much she sounds like Twilight." That one caught the princess off guard. "I have a little heart attack every time Twilight says my name. She yells at me the exact same way Kylie did. That and how they kinda try to mommy the shit out of everyone. Outside that the similarities kinda end. But fuck me if she doesn't sound like her twin."

Shane became silent for a moment, as Celestia mentally processed that piece of information. It certainly could have explained a lot.

"Don't tell her I said that," Shane warned. "I don't want her to know."

"Why not? I think she'd be flattered," Celestia pressed, hoping to get the human to open up a bit more.

"I don't know," he admitted. "I just don't want her to know. Life is less complicated that way."

"Loneliness may be less complicated but it isn't better."

"I'm not lonely. I'm independent."



“Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?”

“I’m not having this discussion right now. If you’re going to start this journey of self introspection shit then I can get up and leave,” he warned.

“Fine,” the alicorn relented.

The night wore on as the human did his best to explain the images to the alicorn. She didn’t understand a lot of what he said. So much of his vernacular was dependant on complex military acronyms or pop culture references that it was all but completely lost on the princess.

Despite the barriers in communication she had learned more about the human’s past that night than the past few weeks combined. She wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol in his system or if he was actually beginning to open up to her. She decided after a brief moment of contemplation that it was rather irrelevant at this point.

The human suppressed a yawn. Not the first one Celestia noticed. She looked out the expansive window. The moon was already halfway across the sky. They had been talking later than she realized.

“I think we might have to call it a night, Major.” Shane nodded sleepily. He shut down the device. The batteries were teetering on the last dredges of life. “You can sleep here tonight if you like,” she offered standing and stretching her wings.

He fixed her with an odd look. “...what?”

“Well if I send you off now, you’ll either get lost or pass out in the hallway... or both. I thought I would at least offer.”

“Oh...” He laughed to himself. “Alright then. Thanks I’ll uh... sleep on the couch.

Celestia shrugged. “Suit yourself. The bed is more than large enough if you’d prefer. I don’t mind sharing.”

Shane rubbed the back of his head laughing uncomfortably. “I ...

honestly can't tell... is this like ... societal miscommunication or are you just fucking with me?"

Celestia paused turning to face the human curiously. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Wow... Alright I guess we're going to have this conversation. Uuuuh," he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "...okay...like...I know you guys tend to be a bit more touchy feely, but in most human circles inviting someone to your bed is kinda seen as...like... an indication of intimacy."

Celestia blinked at the human.

"Sex," he deadpanned.

Celestia's eyes widened a bit, suddenly understanding. "Ah. I see." She chuckled softly. "It isn't uncommon for ponies to share a bed with one another. I can assure the offer was as devoid of disreputable intent as intended," Celestia smiled, "Although I was working under the assumption you were a gentleman, and would not take it as such."

"I don't know what your basing that assumption off of, but I can assure you, you were grossly misinformed."

"Regardless I am sorry if I made you uncomfortable. It was not my intention."

Shane sniffed, immediately back to his normal self. "You didn't make me uncomfortable." He stretched exaggeratedly. "I was just trying to think of a nice way of letting you down," he teased.

"Letting me down?"

"It's just that I'm kind of...you know...out of your league," he explained with a shit eating grin.

Celestia huffed, "YOU'RE out of MY league?" Celestia laughed.

"Try not to take it as an insult, highness, but I mean let's be honest..." he pointed up and down his person. "USDA Prime cut of

trophy husband meat right here.”

Celestia couldn't help but laugh, giving an offended huff. “Well now you're definitely not sleeping in the bed.”

“I mean don't get me wrong. I'm sure by equine standards you're a smoke show. If you were a thousand years younger and I was a thousand years older then I might even con-OKAY JOKE! OW! JESUS! FUCK! JOKE!” the human cried frantically as the alicorn began batting the human with the brunt of her wing.

She folded her now ruffled wing back to her side after human could retreat no further into the couch.

He spat out a few small feathers. “Feel better?” he asked the smiling alicorn.

“Yes,” Celestia assured turning away from the human with a flick of her ethereal tail. “Goodnight, Major.”

“Goodnight, Princess.”

~~~~~

“Celestia!” Luna shouted into her sister's bedroom, searching for the solar alicorn. “We cannot locate the human and he will soon be late for his appointment.”

Celestia rose groggily from her bed sheets. There were still a few moments before she had to raise the sun. She felt as if she had only just lain down.

Luna approached the bed. “We have not seen him since dinner. We were wondering where you had deposited him for the night.”

Celestia slowly recalled the previous night. “He's on the couch, Lu,” she muttered as she rubbed her eye with the back of her hoof.

Luna looked around the room confusedly. “Whose couch?”

“My couch, Luna he's right...” Celestia blinked a few times, only to see the piece of furniture was indeed empty. “Major?” she called

out looking around the room. “Shane!”

There was an audible thud from the couch followed by a muffled, “Dammit!” The human rolled from under the couch rubbing his forehead painfully. “What?!” he asked irritably.

The two alicorns merely regarded him with confused stares. “Why are you under the couch?”

“I was sleeping,” he groaned rolling onto his stomach and burying his face in the crook of his elbow.

“I gathered that,” Celestia droned. “I was wondering why you were doing so under the couch as opposed to on top of it.”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled.

“How much did you actually drink last night?” Luna asked.

He waved a hand in a non-committal fashion before folding his arm back under himself.

Luna looked to Celestia who merely shrugged. The Lunar alicorn made her way over to the hungover human and attempted to poke and prod him back to the conscious world.

Celestia stepped toward her expansive balcony window, horn glowing with solar energy. The first rays of sunshine began to lance over the distant horizon, piercing the darkened land with golden rays of light. Celestia’s tower-top room was always the first to receive the light of a new day, as Luna’s was always the first to see the moon. Clever construction on the part of the architects, the human however seemed wholly unappreciative of the engineering marvel as sunlight flooded the darkened room.

Luna had coaxed him into a sitting position when the Celestia brought forth the massive star. He made an exaggeratedly pained groan as his bloodshot eyes were assaulted with ten thousand lumens of unfiltered sunshine.

He screwed his eyes shut as he turned away from the window. “Oh my God,” he mumbled to himself. “Are you serious? Could you like

not?”

“It is time to awaken, Major,” Luna prompted, kindly extending an azure wing to shield the human from the brunt of the light.

He fumbled around in his pockets for a few moments, eventually digging the pair of scuffed Oakleys from his cargo pocket. He hid his eyes behind the polarized lenses, before tentatively blinking open his eyes as they adjusted.

“Better?” Luna asked.

“Barely,” he muttered.

“Well you’ll have to suffer through it for the time being. We have to get you ready for your final examinations.”

Shane groaned before pushing himself to his feet and rubbing his head sorely. “How long will it take?”

Luna took a few encouraging steps toward the door. “A few hours at most.” She opened the door beckoning him out. “If we make it on time, that is.”

Shane stumbled out the door after the Lunar alicorn. “I need to brush my teeth,” he commented distastefully licking his canines.

“I shall see you two later,” Celestia called after them.

Shane merely offered a backward wave as he staggered after Luna down the hall.

~~~~~

“What kind of test is it?” he asked after a few paces.

“Not really a test per se. A psychiatric exam to be blunt about it,” she explained as they walked. “The mare is quite gifted though. She has also done great things in many fields of the mind, from psychotherapy to marriage counseling.”

“A shrink?” he sounded less than enthused.

“If you wish to sum it up so crudely, yes,” she frowned.

“I don’t wanna go to a shrink,” he groaned.

“Stop,” she chided. “You’re acting like a foal. It won’t kill you to at least give it a try. ”

“You really wanna try and tackle that mess? You’re not gonna like it, I’ll just save you the trouble.”

Clichéd though his mocking comment was, Luna could feel the apprehension radiating off of him in waves. “I dare think, Major, that you are the one will not like what we will find. Not the other way around.”

“I already know I won’t like what I find. That’s why I don’t look. If I wanted to I would have sought out a shrink myself. Thank you very much.”

She had many theories about the human’s behavioral issues. As much as he clung to his various coping mechanisms, his subterfuge was anything but subtle. His reactive formations spoke volumes about the depth of the emotions he claimed not to have. For all the time she could wax eloquent about the nature and stance of this particular train wreck of a functioning living being, she decided for the moment to let the professionals concoct their own theories and conclusions.

Their walk was mostly silent. Luna was content to let it be. It took them briefly by the human’s cell, where he performed his various morning rituals, clothes changed, teeth brushed, and face shaved. When he emerged he looked much better for it, the recesses of fatigue and alcohol now much less prominent, although the polarized lenses of his sunglasses remained.

They arrived in another part of the castle, one even the human recognized. The academic section on the city side of the structure. The area was occupied mostly by various academies, arts and sciences alike, for Celestia School for Gifted Unicorns. The school was, of course, open to all races, the name was merely a relic from a different time. It also happened to be the location of their next

appointment.

They approached an ordinary looking office. No guards were stationed at the doors, no golden filigree to decorate it. It was for all intents and purposes just another office. One that any professor or teacher might have.

“This is where I leave you, Major,” Luna said quietly.

She caught the slight look of panic flash across the human’s eyes. “You’re not coming?”

“I’m afraid not. This sort of thing tends to be a bit too... indirect for my liking.” She said cryptically. “I think this meeting will be just as much for your benefit as it could possibly be for us.”

Shane’s face immediately soured into a look similar to one a child gets upon having broccoli piled onto their plate. He had already resigned himself to hate it before it even began.

She placed a hoof on his hip, fixing him with her most honest and motherly stare. “Please try to keep an open mind, Shane.”

His face didn’t change, as it often didn’t. She however could not force him to accept help. She could only show him the door and hope for the best.

Luna tapped on the door with a silver clad hoof and nudging the human in the shoulder with the tip of her horn. He grumbled and shot her an irritated look, but she merely smiled sweetly.

The door opened to reveal a very light coated brown unicorn mare with a dark blonde mane and tail. Her coat was refractive and sparkly, an obvious testament to a crystal heritage. On her nose sat a small pair of reading glasses. Shane cocked his head quizzically. Luna realized it would be the first time he had ever seen a crystal pony.

She smiled calmly as she lowered her head and spoke with a barely noticeable accent. “Hello, Princess,” she raised her head toward the human. “You must be Major Doran. Please,” she moved aside, “... come in so we can get started.”

Shane cast one last backward glance at the lunar alicorn before stepping inside the office of the crystal pony.

“Best of luck,” Luna murmured quietly.

The mare smiled again, at the princess, apparently understanding her trepidation. “I am sure it will be fine. Thank you your highness. I shall have him back to you shortly.”

Luna nodded, as she turned back down the hallway hearing the door shut behind her.

~~~~~

She made her way into her office. The bipedal creature was looking around the spacious office curiously. There was a desk piled with books and papers, in front of a comfortable looking office chair. Bookshelves lined a majority of the walls. Dark stained wood and plush rugs were the main theme. It was cozy, warm, disarming, and safe. The kind of feeling one would expect from a doctor of thoughts. Quite the stark difference between the cold sterile environments of other medical fields.

“Please have a seat, Major,” she grabbed his attention. “May I call you Shane?”

He removed his polarized sunglasses blinking his eyes a few times. “Uh...Sure,” he said with a half smile.

He seemed oddly nervous. He deposited himself into an easy chair by a coffee table in the center of the room. She took the one opposite, settling in herself.

“My name is Athena,” she introduced herself.

“Athena?” he grinned slightly as if she were joking.

“Mmhmm,” she affirmed. “What’s funny?” she asked smiling back in slight confusion.

He shrugged almost self consciously. “Nothing I guess. It’s just... not what I’ve come to expect from pony names.”



“How do you mean?” she asked genuinely curious. Hopefully he would elaborate a little about his opinions of ponydom.

“It’s usually something like Sugar Glitter or some kind of strange combination of nouns and adverbs and such. Athena is actually a human name. Not a common one, really but she was a goddess in greek mythology. Goddess of logic, I think, or knowledge... wisdom, something academic like that. I can’t remember.”

“Interesting. I suppose I’m lucky to have it then,” she laughed, happy to have gotten the dialogue rolling so easily.

“Fitting if nothing else,” he agreed.

“Yours is rather fitting as well if you don’t mind me saying,” she noted.

“Mine?”

“Your name,” she clarified. “You don’t know what it means?”

“It’s just a name. It doesn’t mean anything that I know of,” he admitted.

“I’m sure it’s likely that some things might not have carried over, transdimensionally speaking,” she smiled and twirled a hoof whimsically. “...but there is a similar one I’ve heard. Originally Connemaran if memory serves. Spelled slightly differently too, with two Rs. I took the liberty of looking it up when the princess told me you would be coming.”

“What does it mean?” he asked seeming genuinely curious.

“Stranger,” she said with finality. “One who wanders, or one who is lost. Exile or Pariah in some of the more extreme sources,” she annotated. “But the general idea is still pretty much the same. Someone far from home.”

Shane stared at the mare for several unblinking seconds before the corner of his mouth lifted in amusement. He finally sniffed in amusement, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Shane leaned back in his chair. "So now that we've been formally introduced, what exactly is the goal here today? What is it that they want to get out of this? Or did Luna wake me up and drag me here so that we could have a lovely discussion about the origin of names?"

She flicked her tail into a more comfortable position before answering. "I suppose there is no real goal. If anything 'what they get out of this' is whatever you are willing to put in. A lot of my various jobs tend to be little more than interpreting the things that I hear, and hopefully arranging them in way that makes sense. I did a lot of reading up on you before our appointment. It seems the princess already knows most of what she needs to about you. Your previous tests and examinations were extremely thorough."

"...extremely," the human repeated with an emphatic smile.

"Yes, well if I may be perfectly honest I believe the princess arranged for you to meet me believing it was more for your benefit than hers," she took a stretch with her comment, hoping a measure of candor might embody a little trust in the human.

"I thought this was supposed to be a psychiatric evaluation," he said neutrally.

"In a sense I suppose it is, but the mind is not exactly something that can be diagnosed and repaired like a broken bone. Even among our own species such tests tend to only give a glimpse of the subjects mental state, even then it's only a rough calculation based on large samples of what is generally accepted as 'normal'." She punctuated with air quotes.

"Then why bother?" he asked leaning forward resting his elbows on his knees and lacing his fingers together. "If it's such an inconclusive science then why waste the time?"

She half smiled. "You don't like psychiatrists do you?"

Shane frowned, unhappy that his questions were diverted. "No, I don't,"

“May I ask why?”

He didn't say anything for a moment. “I don't like that someone who hasn't lived my life tries to tell me how to feel about it.”

“I'm not here to do that,” she assured. “I'm only here because I think we might be able to help each other. We're curious about you. How your mind works, what drives you, what makes humans tick, if you will,” she grinned to herself.

He let out a humorless laugh. “Well you have your work cut out for you then.”

She smiled in return. “You might be surprised what we can learn from small things like this. I've already got a desk full of reports on you,” she levitated one such folder onto her lap. “Major Doran, Shane T. Military veteran,” she read slowly. “Male, twenty-six years of age, blood type O-negative, in remarkably good health considering your... lifestyle...” she murmured the last part somewhat to herself.

“What's that supposed to mean?” he sounded somewhat offended.

“Well, I don't think you'd be surprised to find that some of your behaviors are... alarming to say the least.” The mare shuffled the folder in her hooves, adjusting the spectacles on her muzzle and began to read. “Subject exhibits self destructive tendencies, emotionally repressive, shows little to no respect for the sanctity of life,” she turned the page and continued, “...alcoholism, substance abuse, difficulty sleeping, anxiety, paranoia, aggression, narcissism...”

“I get it,” he interrupted. “Thank you.”

She set the folder in her lap. “I apologize for the bluntness, Major but do you understand our point? We can help you if you want. Addiction, grief counseling, post traumatic stress. It's all available if you need it. You just have to ask.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” he said with deceptive honesty while looking expectantly at his watch. He stood and regarded the crystal

unicorn with practiced neutrality. "I'm afraid I have to meet someone soon...and it sounds like you've just about got it all figured out on your own. I know I certainly feel oodles better. Thank you for your time, Doc. Now if you don't mind I think I'll see myself out."

She removed her glasses and stood as well. Her horn lit with a silvery light, and a card with her name and information on it. "If you should ever like to talk, Shane, please feel free to drop by," she invited.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," he added smiling coldly as he plucked the card from her magic and tucked it in a pocket. He made his way to the door. "Have a lovely day."

With that the human shut the door behind him. Athena sighed in defeat. She stood lingering over their discussion for several seconds before returning to her desk to begin her admittedly scant report to the princess.

~~~~~

"About as well as you would expect," Athena answered Luna's question preemptively. The unicorn slid her limited findings across the table.

The night princess' shoulders slumped slightly. Not that she was particularly surprised. "Did you learn anything?"

"I learned he does not like me or my profession," she said plainly.

"He doesn't like much of anypony at first I am afraid," Luna corrected sadly.

"Well if nothing else his responses or lack thereof," she added, "might be all the validation you need to verify your theories. Some of his behaviors are such textbook matches that it makes me think twice about even listing them. Others I can only speculate but I found your original analysis to be fairly accurate. There isn't much I can add to it."

Luna nodded but did chose not to further comment.

Athena began timidly. "Princess...If I may be so bold. Have you considered simply..." she chose her words very carefully, "...looking for yourself? Is that even an option?"

Luna let her breath out through her nose. "Unfortunately it is..." She knew what the unicorn was implying. "I have considered it," she admitted finally. "There are ramifications to dreamwalking my little pony." Luna rose from her seat and began walking about the office. "It is not something that I do lightly. Even among our own species."

"Would he really know?" she asked quietly. "Barely a hoofful of your own subjects are aware that you guard their dreams even after your intervention."

"He would most likely not," she stared out Athena's office window. "But aside from the obvious there are other implications to consider," the alicorn explained carefully. "The dreamscape is a wild place, one I manage to navigate merely because I am familiar. I understand the basic thought processes of the average pony. We have no guarantee that his mind works in the same way. I may very well lose my way, or possibly my own sanity. Dreams are one thing, they are often whimsical... immaterial things. The mind itself is another beast entirely."

Athena adjusted herself in her seat. "I won't presume to understand, princess. It was merely a suggestion."

"One that, after today, I fear I may have to give a more thorough consideration," she finished sadly. "Do you know where he has gone?"

"I'm afraid I don't princess. I assumed he would make his way back to you after he left. He mentioned something about having to ... meet somepony."

Luna suppressed a groan, hoping the biped had not become lost in the labyrinth of castle corridors. She remembered thankfully the charms on the band she had given him with some comfort. He would at least be easy to track down if that were the case.

“Thank you Athena, I apologize for wasting your time.”

The crystal unicorn lowered her head with a small smile. “Not at all, Princess. I thank you for the opportunity.”

~~~~~

Aegis checked the clock on his wall. The human was due at any moment now. He was actually looking forward to this. It would be educational if nothing else. Equestria would on occasion train with allied militaries. It helped build camaraderie and increase cross compatibility in the event of large scale conflicts. He was eager to see what insights the human could offer his troops. This would hopefully be the first of many more assessments of his guards.

Humankind had clearly evolved to fight very differently than ponies. It would be interesting to see what they could learn from one another. If the militaries of the human’s world were anything like Shane described them the Commander had no doubt that he would find pony styles of warfare primitive at best. But he was proud of his troops.

He checked the clock again, wondering in hindsight if he should have merely picked up the human himself rather than trusting him to find his own way.

~~~~~

Shane opened another door... and found yet another empty room. The human had been idly opening doors in a seemingly endless corridor for what felt like hours. He wondered internally how many broom closets one castle could possibly have as he turned the knob on yet another door.

He paused at the sight. There appeared to be some sort of bizarre creature taking a bubble bath in some kind of floating bathtub while whistling a tuneless song.

The copious pink bubbles made it difficult to really tell where one animal part started and the next began but the...thing had a set of mismatched horns growing out of its head, and was currently

scrubbing its back with a long handled brush held in an eagle claw while a lion paw snapped and produced a bottle of shampoo from thin air. A large red reptilian tail snaked its way from the suds and coiled around the basin.

Shane cleared his throat uncomfortably catching the things attention.

It regarded him with strange red-irised yellow eyes, looking the human up and down before humming to himself. "... You're new," he commented interestedly.

The human struggled to find something to say. "... I'm uh... trying to find the uh... guard commander's office," he elaborated awkwardly.

The draconequus scrutinized the human for several more silent moments before speaking. The bipedal creature reeked of residual chaos. He would have to introduce himself properly later. He resumed his scrubbing anyway. "Take the hallway all the way down and the up the stairs, take the first hallway on your right and it's the office closest to the big window."

"Thanks..." the human slowly closed the door, doing little to nothing to hide his wildly disturbed expression.

The door closed and the human began to continue his way down the hallway. He stopped after a few paces and turned to examine the door once more, as if to ensure that it was still there and he had not merely hallucinated the entire thing.

~~~~~

"I see you've made it." Aegis smiled at the human as he entered the office. "Did you find the place okay?"

The human looked back out the office door apparently very uneasy about something. "I uh...got directions."

Aegis noted his tension with some confusion. "Well you made it. That's what matters. Come along, we have a lot to see."

Shane shook his head a bit, before clearing his throat and nodding. "Yeah...lead the way."

~~~~~

"Very impressive," the human smiled happily as several formations of soldiers marched across the drill field, armored hooves in near perfect sync to create a very impressive display of force.

"What do you think?" Aegis asked the human standing in front of several formations of gold and silver armored ponies.

"Well they look good, and I'll be fucked if they don't drill like gods," he assured the older stallion. "But pretty doesn't win battles. Can they fight?"

Aegis smiled. "Come. We'll wonder over to the training grounds, and you can see for yourself."

They made their way from the parade deck toward a large rectangular field about half a mile across. A long track ran along its border. Several smaller formations made their way around the field, physically conditioning their bodies in various ways.

"We keep them in shape if nothing else. I hate to admit the royal guard these days has become largely ceremonial. They're closer to a national police force than an army."

"When was the last time they saw combat?" the human asked as he scanned the field curiously.

"Open warfare? Never. The last full scale war was long before even my time. These days the guard deals mostly with raiders, or dangerous criminals, maybe the occasional rampaging monster. Mostly they're job is to protect the capital and the princesses."

"How do they fight? Or do they simply trample things to death en mass."

The stallion chuckled. "Standard infantry use a spear. Specialty or ceremonial units often use a halberd. City patrols either a spear or short sword. There are special maneuver units that tend to use



whatever suits them. They're called Dagger Teams. Small specialized missions. They tend to keep their own schedules and requisitions."

The human laughed tiredly, "Pony Special Forces, now with deep cover tactical snuggle action."

Aegis grinned in return, "I wouldn't recommend snuggling one if you can avoid it. Most were recruited from the Night Guard, Luna's Sentinels," he elaborated.

The intention must have been lost on the human. He didn't seem impressed. "Why haven't I seen them around?" he asked.

"You likely have," the commander said. "Many are not required to wear uniforms. Although these days even they don't see much beyond drills and training. Much to their displeasure. It's all very secretive" he laughed slightly.

"If it's so secretive how do you know so much?"

Aegis smiled nostalgically. "I used to be one."

~~~~~

The older stallion sat in the grass patiently as the human watched with impartial curiosity. Two stallions were in a dirt ring, slowly circling each other with practiced concentration. They held wooden training swords in their mouths occasionally flicking the blade from side to side as their positions changed.

One stallion finally stopped, kicking forward with his powerful hind legs launching at his opponent swiping upward toward his opponent. The other guard barely managed to bring his own sword down to deflect the attack. The two exchanged a flurry of blows.

Aegis watched the human frown seemingly confused. "What's wrong?"

Shane scratched his chin. "I'm not exactly a swordsman, but it seems like they keep missing opportunities for killing blows."

“Our guards are taught to defend themselves with their weapons. Only using them offensively in the most dire of circumstances. We train them to avoid unnecessary bloodshed,” he explained.

Shane made an understanding noise but frowned nonetheless.

“You disapprove?” Aegis said, although it wasn’t really a question.

He shrugged noncommittally. “This world is not my world,” he said quietly. “I’m not going to tell you how to train your men. If this is the best thing for them than keep doing it, regardless of my opinion.”

“I still wouldn’t be opposed to hearing it,” he offered.

“They used to tell us... ‘The best defense is a good offense’,” Shane replied. “Dead men don’t fight back.”

Aegis nodded. “I don’t disagree with you,” he reminded casually. “Luckily things are not so cruel here.”

“Not right now,” he said quietly. “Mercy is a luxury your enemies are not very likely to afford you.”

“You come from a savage place, human.”

“Maybe...” he relented somewhat. “But those who can’t kill will always be subject to those who can. It’s not a noble truth, but it’s the way the world is. I’m not suggesting you walk around picking fights but if one finds its way to your doorstep I suggest you hastily snap its fucking neck before it snaps yours.”

Aegis turned back toward the sparring stallions, “A depressing perspective,” he noted.

“It tends to be,” the human agreed placing a cigarette between his lips. “But if it’s any comfort to you, our organizations don’t really share the same goals. So any comparison of philosophies would be somewhat unfair.”

“How do you mean?”

"You're more of a peacekeeping organization. We usually only get let off the chain when 'peace' is already a long forgone conclusion." he explained simply.

"The goal of any military is still to protect and restore peace though is it not?"

The human chuckled cynically. "Well sure...kill everything... peace is restored." He waved his hands like a magic trick. "Like I said... dead men don't fight back."

"I think I understand," Aegis relented, only slightly disturbed.

"I have to get back to your boss before she sends a search party," he noted looking at the sky critically. "I will see you tomorrow," the human stepped back and delivered a departing salute.

Aegis copied the gesture and the human began to leave. "Do you need somepony to walk you back so you don't get lost?"

"I'll be fine," the human called back. "I'll never learn if people keep taking me places."

~~~~~

The unicorn trotted along the maze of corridors in the castle. Star Shimmer usually was quite satisfied with her position in the castle. She worked a comfortable schedule, the pay kept her afloat. Overall she had very few complaints.

But lately things were becoming... unsettled. Ever since she saw that creature is the rainstorm... There was too much strangeness for her liking. And then the papers playing it off as a 'visiting dignitary'? She knew better. Something was up.

"Sorry," she said reflexively as she nearly bumped into a tall, strangely dressed, biped as he passed.

"You're fine," it assured in a distracted monotone.

She continued for a few paces, buried in her thoughts. Even her colt friend was acting strangely. And he worked for the Guard. He

had to know what was going on. If anyone should know about what was happening it would be hi...

She stopped in her tracks as the realization struck her like a sack of hammers. She spun in place and saw the very subject of her franticism, casually walking in the opposite direction.

It was him. It had to be. She had been replaying the memory over in her head a thousand times. Staring out the window at the furious thunderstorm, a flash of thunder revealing that thing being escorted in shackles. Now was her chance for some answers.

“Hey wait!”

He did not. In fact he gave no indication that he had heard whatsoever and continued down the hallway unperturbed.

She sped after the creature as he turned down a seemingly random corridor. “Wait, I just want to talk to you!”

He gestured with his arm, “Well then keep up. I’m running late as it is,” he said calmly over his shoulder.

She finally caught up to the biped. He moved surprisingly fast for his lack of legs. “You’re the one they’re all talking about aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” he answered simply. “What are they saying?”

“You’re a new species. A human, visiting diplomat from a very faraway place, here helping the Princess.”

“I’m not a diplomat,” he corrected neutrally as he continued to walk.

“What are you then?”

“Lost,” he said simply. “For the second time today, actually,” he muttered. “How do you people find your way around this place?”

“I can help you,” she offered. “If you’ll stop and talk to me.”

“If you wanna talk you’re going to walk, I got places to be.”

“If you don’t know where you’re going then how are you in a hurry to get there?” she challenged the strange creature.

“I’ll get somewhere eventually,” he said confidently as he resumed walking.

“None of its true is it?” she said with finality keeping pace beside the human.

“None of what?” he asked in passing.

“I saw you that night,” she added. The human stopped walking, and turned toward the unicorn his face a mask of stone. “The night of the thunderstorm,” she went on. “You were walking across the grounds in chains. Surrounded by guards. That doesn’t sound like any dignitary I’ve ever seen,” she challenged hotly.

The human paused before taking several weighty steps toward the comparatively diminutive unicorn. She did her best not to show her immediate fear. She was not particularly tall and the bipedal human towered over her. And it took a considerable amount of her willpower to suppress the instincts that told her to back away.

He sat on his heels and came uncomfortably close to her muzzle. He stared into her eyes for several very uncomfortable seconds. “What’s your name?” he asked finally.

“St-Star Shimmer,” she finally managed to say.

A trace of recognition flashed across his face. He cocked his head to the side. “Star Shimmer...” he repeated, smiling slightly “You work here in the castle?”

She nodded.

“You’re a clerk in the exchange office?” he added.

“How did-” her heart began to skip.

“Yeah I know you,” he confirmed to himself. “You got a boyfriend

in the Guard, a jumpy little pegasus named Auburn Sky? Bout ...” he held his hand a few inches above her head. “...yea high?”

She moved her mouth but no words were coming out. Suddenly she very much regretted flagging this creature down. “H-How did... Who told you that?”

The corner of the human’s lip curled back in an amused smirk as he let the unicorn stew for several seconds. “Your boyfriend talks about you a lot.” The human began to chuckle at the mare’s expense. Seemingly finding unending amusement in her flustered face.

“How do you know Sky?” she asked suddenly finding her voice.

“He’s one of my ‘guards’.” He explained with finger quotes. “He talks about you while he’s on post. Often while I’m trying to sleep,” he added distastefully. “I figured... how many Star Shimmers can there be?” he laughed at her expression with renewed vigor.

“You learned all that from just listening to him talk?” she asked still confused.

“He talks a lot,” the human droned. “Unfortunately for you, I listened.” She stood there unspeaking for several moments “I know,” he laughed and patted her cheek in an attempt to bring her back from her stupor. “Small world, right?”

She honestly wasn’t sure if she was mad at her coltfriend or not.

He looked at his wristwatch. “Well hey, this was fun but I gotta go. Tell your boyfriend I’m sorry for yesterday if you see him before I do. I kinda kidnapped em’ and forced them to go UA so could have a drink.” With that he stood up and continued to walk down the hallway, leaving the thoroughly confused pony behind.

She took a few moments to reassemble her shattered thoughts, before she could process what she had been told. She saw the human quickly leaving her behind as he aimlessly stalked down the halls. “Wait!” she ran after the creature. “You never answered my question!”

“About the news articles!” she reminded angrily. “Are they true?!”

“No. None of them are true!” he replied mockingly. “There, you happy? You got your answer. Now...” he made a little ‘shoo’ gesture before turning back to his walk.

She galloped after him. “Wait! You can’t just say that with no explanation!”

“You sound upset,” he noted curiously. “It seemed like that was exactly what you were hoping I’d say.”

“You’re just going to admit it though?” she asked still horribly flustered.

“Jesus lady, what do you want from me? Would you like to hear it in the form of a riddle or something?”

“No but... Why just tell me. Isn’t it like ...secret?”

“I can see why you two are dating now. Although I can’t even imagine how either of you get words in edgewise.”

“That’s not funny!”

He shook his head and continued on.

“You’re really not going to tell me?”

“No.”

“Why not?!” she complained.

“Why should I? You’ll find out in a few days anyway. It’s really not that fuckin’ exciting. I’m just a stray, alright? The princesses are only trying to help me find a way home.”

“First of all- oh goddess you’re an alien,” she almost whispered as realization struck her.

Shane clapped both of his hands to his cheeks forming a little ‘O’ with his mouth in a mocking overly dramatic ‘surprised face’.

“Well you don’t have to be patronizing about it...” she said a little embarrassed that it hadn’t taken so long to realize.

\*Tak Tak Tak\*

The sound caught them both of guard. They looked to the source of the noise.

Shane let out an impressed OOoooooh, at the sight. A resplendent crimson Phoenix sat on the window sill, tapping gently, as if requesting entry. The avian creature had a gorgeous set of bright flaming plumage. The blood red feathers were tipped in a dusky flickering gold.

The human immediately went to the window flicking the latch and swinging it open for the unusual bird. Completely forgetting about his equine guide.

The phoenix ducked inside the castle corridor spreading its wings and doing several investigatory loops around the strange new bipedal creature. She hadn’t seen it before that she could recall. Not that she often paid much attention to the myriad of guests Celestia entertained.

He laughed with almost childlike amazement at the fiery display. The phoenix hovered in front of the human for several seconds as if awaiting something.

Shane stuck his arm out reflexively and the phoenix perched itself on his forearm to get a closer look.

“Look at you!” he said still in utter wonder of the mythical bird. “You’re a very pretty one, yes you are,” he spoke with dangerously uncharacteristic sweetness.

The phoenix beamed at the unexpected praise, puffing out her chest proudly. Deciding she would give this newcomer the benefit of the doubt.

“I bet I know what you are,” he murmured tentatively offering his other hand to the phoenix for her appraisal. She shuffled her wings as he did, prodding the human’s free hand with her beak. The



human took the gesture as permission and almost brushed the phoenix when he pulled his finger back, apparently thinking better of it. "Don't you set me on fire, now," he warned. "You promise not to burn me?"

The phoenix made no such promise merely chirping in response.

"Alright just so long as we understand each other," he said, finally reaching up and gently rubbing the side of the bird's neck. The bird rolled her head around the finger apparently pleased with the treatment.

Shane let out another marveled laugh, as he began to pet the mythical bird who only seemed extremely satisfied with the attention. "You just might be the coolest thing I've seen all week," he told the phoenix. "I'm gonna take you to dinner, Yeah? Does that sound fun? Are you a hungry one? You want some food?"

The Phoenix chirped excitedly at the prospect. Compliments, petting, and food? She decided she liked this new creature very much.

~~~~~

Celestia speared a daisy leaf with her fork levitating the morsel to her muzzle and chewed thoughtfully. The elements of harmony chatted idly as they too enjoyed their meals. Luna sat by her sister's side munching through her own dinner after regaling them of the utter lack of cooperation on the human's part during his interview.

"Have you heard from Cadence yet, Shining Armor?" She asked the only stallion sitting at the table.

He nodded, smiling softly. "She should be here tomorrow."

"How much did you tell her?" Luna asked in between bites.

"As much as I could," he replied.

Luna took a sip of her drink. "That will save a lot of time explaining then. How did she react?"

Shining Armor shrugged. "I'm not sure really, she just sent a letter back saying she was on her way."

Shane finally wandered through the doors of the expansive dining hall. The rest of the assembled ponies had elected to start eating already after the human didn't show. Celestia was relieved to see him, although his expectantly excited grin and the large bulge in his blouse was rather alarming.

A unicorn mare that Celestia didn't recognize was trying desperately to follow the human through the massive doors before he kicked it shut in her face. The knob gave an unsuccessful rattle.

"Hello, Major," Celestia greeted as she set her utensils down. "Who was that?"

"No one," he dismissed nonchalantly. "Look what I found," he said suppressing his giggling. He clicked his tongue and the bulge in his blouse began to squirm. Celestia had to physically keep her jaw closed when Philomena poked her head out of the top of his shirt. "I made a friend," he announced proudly.

"Philomena?" Celestia asked bewildered.

The Phoenix happily nuzzled the human's chin. "I've named it, Pontiac" The Phoenix scrambled out of the human's blouse and perched herself on his head. He grimaced through his smile as her claws dug into his scalp. He reached up and gingerly lifted the bird off his head. "Who likes to climb? You do! Yes you do!" The phoenix chirped flaring her wings delightedly in response.

Celestia's jaw actually did open a little this time. She had never in her dizziest daydreams ever thought the he was capable of speaking to anything with such affection... at least not sober. The assembled ponies seemed to share her confusion.

The alicorn collected herself enough to speak. "Her name is Philomena, Major. A very rare breed of phoenix and she's belongs to me."

Shane hugged the bird defensively. "Get your own."

Celestia whistled and extended her wing. The phoenix called back excitedly, and wriggled away from the human. "Hey!" he called after her.

She flapped toward her owner and circled before landing daintily upon the alicorn's downy wing, and nuzzling Celestia fondly. Shane nodded with steely eyes and pursed lips. "And I thought what we had was special," the scorned human muttered, glaring at the adulterous bird.

"I was wondering where she'd gotten off to," Celestia said wistfully. "Where did you find her?"

Shane found a seat between Twilight and Rarity and lowered himself into it. "I didn't. She found me." The phoenix hopped down onto the table making her way over to the human. "Oh yeah, act like we're friends again," he said folding his arms. The phoenix chirped and cocked her head. "Don't give me that you know what you did."

She hung her head disappointedly. She peered back up at the human ruffling her feathers sending a small flicker of flames from the tips.

"Yes, you're very talented," he assured the pyromatic bird. He stuck out his wrist and the phoenix happily hopped aboard, apparently forgiven. She balanced her wings as the human scratched her neck with a finger much to her contentment before depositing her on his shoulder, where she once more hopped up onto the top of his head. He gritted his teeth with discomfort but did not bother to shoo her away.

"She seems to like you," Celestia noted smiling at the two.

"Of course she does. I'm delightful," he replied smugly, waving off an approaching maid.

"Not hungry, Major?" Rarity asked casually sipping her drink.

"Starving," he admitted. "But unfortunately pony food isn't exactly... fulfilling for someone with my dietary habits. So I think

I'll be feeding myself tonight.”

Rarity blinked a few times in slight confusion.

“...meat,” he finally plainly.

Rarity felt a slight moment of panic before remembering the human had his own small stockpile of rationed meaty foodstuffs. She returned to her meal only to find her appetite slowly fading.

~~~~~

Luna peered through the human's futuristic night time binoculars. The NVGs as he called them. The top of Luna's tower flashed bright white every second or so. The pulsating light was blinding against the inky night sky.

The strange device cast a bright aura of infrared light which, while not visible to the naked eye, could be seen from many miles. Or so the human assured her. It also sent a radio frequency that could be easily detected by human technologies. He did his best to explain the process but most of the science was lost on the lunar Princess.

Fascinating though it was, she found herself in an uncomfortable position. If this thing were to summon more humans... Equestria... possibly the world would be swallowed in the aftermath. She did not think the nation could handle an invasion of such a scale, friendly or not.

Despite her worries, she had severe doubts the device would ever fulfill its purpose. If her understanding of the situation was accurate, Shane was no longer in the same universe. He was currently broadcasting signals to humans that simply weren't there, and likely never would be.

The events that led to the arrival of Shane's craft were laughably accidental. The probability that they could be intentionally reproduced was outrageously infinitesimally small.

She looked over at the human who was wearing a proud...quite possibly even hopeful smile. She did her best to return it. “It is a fascinating invention, Major,” she answered, not having the heart to

voice her true thoughts to the human. She was sure he knew the effort was futile. But if it helped make him feel better about his situation she was more than willing to go along with it.

She returned through her balcony doors into her room and closing the doors when the human followed behind her. She sat upon a dark blue dias, near a crackling fire. It was not a particularly cold night, so the fireplace was really ablaze more for the ambiance than anything else.

Shane settled on a cushion opposite the dark alicorn. Poking and prodding away on the glowing obsidian screen he called the blackboard. If her understanding of his explanation was correct, the device in his hand could communicate somehow with the beacon on her roof and program it to perform its various functions.

Luna poured herself a glass of red wine. She offered the human one as well which he, of course, accepted quite happily. "Do you think anypony will hear your beacon?" she asked somewhat hesitantly.

"No," he said with alarming ease. "Not really." He reached his fingers into one of the pockets on his blouse, digging out a small black chip. The small piece of plastic was barely larger than a button. He held it between two fingers admiring it in the firelight. "But I got one last idea," he smiled slightly winking at the alicorn as he tucked the chip back away in a pocket. "At least this way I can honestly say I tried everything I could."

"What if you never get home?" she asked bluntly. "What will you do?" She asked heavily, hoping desperately she would not get the answer she expected she would.

"What can I do?"

"Whatever you want I suppose," she offered.

"My areas of expertise seem a bit worthless in the land of magic and rainbows," he drolled.

"You could work for us," she offered.

"And do what? Unless you need someone to stand around to smoke

cigarettes and make smart-assed comments...”

“I’m sure we could find something to occupy you,” she offered, sounding more uncertain than she meant to.

“Do you need anyone killed?”

“Not at the moment,” she admitted, shuffling awkwardly. He lifted his hands in a defeated gesture, as if to say ‘then what?’ before letting them fall to his sides. She shifted in place, resting her head on her folded forelegs. “In all honesty once we are able to reverse engineer the equipment from your vessel, and provided we are able to understand and utilize it, you should not have to work another day in several lifetimes. Equestria could likely become a technological superpower. You could simply retire. You are of course entitled to a controlling share of the profits. Potentially making you one of the wealthiest beings in Equestria. If you should so choose.”

“They’re not my inventions,” he protested.

“They are human creations, and you are the only human on the planet.”

He shrugged appearing mildly interested in the idea. “Retirement sounds pretty good,” he daydreamed. “Do you guys have beaches?”

“Beautiful ones, lagoons, tropical islands, lakeside mountain homes...” she described enticingly.

Shane held a distant smile. “That sounds nice,” he said quietly. “You wanna come with me? Quit the Princess game? Sit on a golden beach all day drinking Mai Tais? I’ll buy you a sombrero?” The human tempted the alicorn.

Luna laughed, “Beguiling though it may be, I’m not sure it’s as simple as that.”

The human sniffed. “Well I can’t go alone. I crave attention. Someone is going to have to retire with me.”

“I am certain you will figure it out. You have quite awhile to

decide. We have much work to do in the meantime.”

He hummed disappointedly. “I shouldn’t be surprised. Celestia had a bad attitude about Mexico too.”

Luna placed a hoof on her chest in mock offense. “I wasn’t the first to be invited? How could you?”

“I wouldn’t have called it an invitation as much as an idea discussed in passing,” he defended with a chuckle. “But at least your sister never tried to give me a dog collar.” The human played with the leather band wrapped around his wrist.

Luna rolled her eyes. “I see you are still upset about that. I assure you I did not intend it as a symbol of subjugation. From what I have seen of the nobility, form fitted neck adornments are apparently very stylish,” she explained. “You arrived with identifying tags around your neck.”

“My dog tags?”

Luna threw up her hoof in frustration. “You even admit they are canine in nature, yet MY offering is offensive?!”

Shane laughed as if amazed that he had to explain it. “Dog tags and a dog collar are different.”

“We do not see how.” She folded her forelegs resolutely.

“How about I get you a bridle or riding crop with my name stamped on it, and expected you to wear it. Then I imagine you’d be somewhere in the ballpark of offense.”

Luna blushed violently at the thought. “Very well,” she folded her ears back against her head. “It was a poorly chosen vehicle and we apologize.”

“Tell me what it’s really for and I’ll think about forgiving you.”

She sighed, no longer seeing much of a point in hiding it. “We had it enchanted with several spells,” she admitted. “Mainly to determine your location if you should become lost or abducted. The

other is to recognize your pulse that we may assist if you should become severely wounded.”

He laughed for some reason. “Are you expecting kidnappers and assassins?”

“We are not sure what to expect, Major,” she answered with no small measure of seriousness.

Shane hummed quietly as he fingered the band thoughtfully. “And it wasn’t easy enough to simply tell me that...why?”

Luna huffed. “Can you really blame us? If I had told you I wanted you tracked, I was certain you would have thought poorly of the idea at best. If I could sneak it passed you and avoid the argument entirely I figured the both of us would be better for it.”

“Bit of a gambler aren’t you?” he teased.

“If the reward is sufficient,” she answered.

“Do you see how little things like that, while well intentioned, can lead me to distrust our... relationship?” he paused, thinking of the right word.

“Of course,” she said readily, “...but can you also see how I am working with limited time and options, and might have the occasional need to circumnavigate needless obstacles? I.e. Your ego that can prevent me from facilitating our oh so delicate plans”

Shane’s stony appearance held for several moments, before finally cracking. He smiled. “I don’t mind the gambling,” he clarified. “I would simply prefer it if you didn’t do so with my chips. I admire bluntness, princess.”

“Your point is made,” she sighed tiredly. “I will do my best to be more candid with you. But if the occasion arises in which I can not, please do not take it as an affront. It is most likely merely the lesser of the evils I am forced to decide between.”

Shane sat back in his cushion. “Not the compromise I was hoping for, but I guess I’ll take it.”



“A old friend of mine once told me the best compromises are ones in which neither party leaves happily,” she grinned nostalgically.

“How cynical,” he noted, tossing back what was left in his glass.

“I thought if anypony were to appreciate that it would be you,” she remarked. An unamused glance was her only reply. She smiled amicably back at the human.

Shane twisted in place, stretching the muscles in his back.

Luna watched attentively. “You’ve stopped wearing your armor.”

The human shrugged neutrally. He seemed like he wanted to say something sharp but chose not to, instead letting the silence hang after the alicorn’s comment.

Luna allowed him to brood. “Major?”

“Hmm?” he responded, still plucking away at this tablet machine.

“We are curious... is there a special significance to the sleeves of thine uniform? We have notice you now wear the sleeves up.”

“Uh,” he began distractedly. “Nothing really significant I guess. It’s just how you’re supposed to wear the uniform while stateside. Like in garrison. Usually if you’re not deployed or in the field your sleeves are supposed to be rolled up like this,” he explained still giving the machine in his hands a controlling share of his attention.

“We like it,” she declared. “You should do it more often.”

Shane laughed at the unusual compliment. “I guess I’ll keep it up just for you then.”

Luna nodded, pleased with the agreement. “It sounds like you are becoming more accustomed to Equestria,” she noted. “You have even gone the whole day without your shotgun. A week ago I would have not thought it possible.”

Shane huffed with a quick grin. “Well... at the risk of sounding overconfident I haven’t really come across anything in your corner

that warranted the firepower.”

“You think us weak, don’t you Major?” she asked slightly flinty.

“Weakness is kinda subjective... Vulnerable might be a better word for what I think of you,” he mused glancing at the alicorn over the top of his machine.

“The things that are often perceived as our greatest weaknesses have historically proven to be our saving grace. There is more to pony kind that meets the eye, Major.”

He cast his eyes critically up and down the midnight blue princess. “I certainly hope so.”

Luna's blush returned, suddenly feeling very scrutinized, and began to search for something to change the subject. She spied her chess set in the corner. “Would you like to play a game with us, Major?”

“I’m uh...kinda working on something, Princess. Maybe in a minute?”

“Very well, we shall prepare while you finish your work.” She began arrange the pieces on the board.”

Shane spotted her over his shoulder. “What is that chess again? I’m not playing your ass at chess anymore!”

Luna groaned, “Why not?”

“You cheat!”

“I do no such thing!” she defended.

“I know you do,” he assured.

“How could you possibly know that,” she protested.

“I know that because last time we played I was cheating and I still lost.” The human fished out the small black chip from his pocket, blowing off a fuzzy that clung to the edge.

Luna very seriously contemplated launching an impressively long tirade about hypocrisy of a cheater complaining about other cheating, but settling for an irritated whiney and crossed her forelegs angrily. The display was largely lost on Shane who was still fussing over the little black button sized chip.

“What is that, anyway?” she asked her curiosity overcoming her pouting.

“Everything,” He replied cryptically holding it up to the light looking for any defects in the miniature contacts. He blew on the chip once more before sliding it into one of the many ports in the side of the tablet.

“Cross your fingers,” he said pensively. Luna shot him a patronized look, waving a hoof at him. “It’s just an expression,” he rolled his eyes.

The obsidian rectangle flashed, seizing his attention. He prodded a few times across the polished glass surface. The alicorn crept next to him, eyeing the screen over his shoulder. There was a small window onscreen labeled ‘Nearby Devices’

\*-EPIRB - Tag 1\* was the only thing on the list.

The human tapped it with his middle finger

GeoSync – ISSPD

COSPAS-SARSAT

“What is the meaning of all these things?” Luna asked curiously.

Shane gave a noncommittal shrug.

“You don’t know?” she asked in disbelief.

“I’ve just been winging it, pushing buttons for like the past ten minutes.”

“It is your machine, should you not know how to operate it?”

“First of all it’s not mine... it’s the Navy’s. Second of all I’ve never had to use one of these like this before. The only reason I even knew it was possible is because I had to sit through the class on these twice because my name wasn’t on the roster for the first one, and I remember there being like one slide on the powerpoint about remote GeoSat links.”

Luna blinked a few times, not understanding several of the words he used.

Shane tagged the small picture of a satellite. Several hundred numbers scrolled down the window. While the small satellite picture cast out little signal lines.

Broadcast Beacon – EPIRB - Tag 1 -

Searching...

Searching...

Establishing Uplink...

Shane made an optimistic noise.

Error...

“Nope,” he rested his head against his fist tiredly.

Searching...

Searching....

“Come on just fail so I can give up and go to bed,” he complained to the device.

Luna watched the human with no small measure of sadness. It was like watching a gambler putting coins into a broken slot machine. Some shred of hope of a jackpot in his heart compelling him to feed the machine his money, knowing in his head that there would be no payout.

“What is it doing?” she asked.

“It’s trying to figure out where it is so it can broadcast coordinates. But there are no satallites here... so eventually it will probably settle on a standard distress signal, and leave the triangulation up to someone else.”

“Why does it keep saying uplink?” she inquired further.

The human scratched his chin. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “It usually only does that when there are incoming freqs from other GeoSync satellites.” He shrugged. “I guess it could be picking up on some kinda background radiation and mistaking it for incoming transmissions. Maybe... off the wall guess. I’m not even sure if space radiation can do that.”

Shane stood and stretched his arms. He pushed the tablet onto the table. “Well I’ll let this little thing think about itself for a bit. If it does anything call me,” he rubbed his eyes. “But I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

“What should we be looking for?” She hoped he didn’t expect her to know how to operate the thing.

“Pretty much anything other than that screen,” he clarified.

She looked over at the little white window that still flashed ‘Searching’ at regular intervals.

Her gaze shifted from the hunting tablet to the human. She nodded in agreement. The human smiled tiredly at the alicorn, hooking an arm around her neck and pulling her into a hasty one-armed hug making sure to scratch the floofy bits around her neck and ears.

Luna’s eyelids fluttered shut as she laughed softly at the human’s affections. Feeling only slightly sad when they finally stopped.

The alicorn collected herself, pushing her mane back into place. “The press conference is the day after tomorrow,” she reminded cautiously.

The human mumbled some response and polished off what was left of his drink. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“You believe so?”

“No, but it made you feel better for a second didn’t it? Wasn’t that a nice second? Fulla good feeling and hope?” he answered with a shit-eating grin as he shook out his legs.

She rolled her eyes, “Ah yes the warm feeling hath flooded through us.”

The human laughed as he started toward the door. “Goodnight, Princess.”

“Major?” he paused turning around curiously.

“...Wouldst thou consider us friends?” she asked plainly.

Shane cocked his head slightly at the question. “I suppose I would,” he finally admitted with a ghost of a smile.

“And you trust us?” she pressed further.

His smile was now fading, uncertain of the direction the questions were going. “As much as I can,” he answered honestly.

She smiled at the human’s answers.

“Was that it?” he asked with a grin.

“Yes, Thank you, Major.”

Shane nodded giving a half assed thumbs up and turning back toward the door once again. “Goodnight, Luna.”

“Goodnight, Shane... Pleasant dreams.” The lunar alicorn watched the human depart down the hallway and down the stairs. She cast her eyes toward the tablet on her table still having accomplished nothing she pushed the device to the back of her mind.

She pushed closed her chamber door.

“Pleasant Dreams,”

## Author's Notes:

POST

Sorry I had to do some stuff

I'm back now though.

I'll talk about this chapter later if you want.

I'm too tired right now.

Here is the A2 tvtropes

[http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/  
Article2](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/Article2)

# ARTICLE 2 part XVII

## ARTICLE 2

### Part XVII

By: Muppetz

~~~~~

“Get up!” Rainbow Dash pleaded with the unconscious human. “HEY!” she reared and placed her forehooves on his chest, pushing as hard as her slim frame would allow.

The human lazily swatted at the Pegasus. “...haze yourself, boot...” he groaned dreamily, still half asleep.

“WAKE UP!” Rainbow Dash practically screamed in the catatonic creature’s ear.

He winced and recoiled, finally gaining enough consciousness to form a coherent thought. “GOD! FUCK! WHAT?! I’m awake! What!?!” the suddenly very cranky human demanded, massaging his ringing ear with a finger.

“Jeez, I thought I was a deep sleeper. I thought you slipped into coma or something,” she complained.

“Rainbow! What. Do. You. Want?” he seethed.

“Princess Luna said she really wants to see you.”

Shane rolled his eyes, turning back over and curling back up on his too-small cot. Rainbow wondered in passing why he didn’t just sleep on the padded floor.

He yawned pulling his too-small blanket up around his neck. “Tell her to try again in the morning and that she’s coming off kinda desperate.”



“...what?” she shook her head. “No...I... Look, just come with me please. It’s really important. It’s your machine... It’s...doing something.”

His ears perked up slightly. His eyes finally cracked open with a sleepy confused stare, unsure if he heard correctly.

~~~~~

Princess Luna’s hoof hovered hesitantly over the polished screen of the human tablet device, uncertain if she should attempt to intervene. Truthfully she didn’t even know where to begin. She retracted her hoof, setting it back on the floor by the other, but continued to stare at the screen worriedly.

She visibly jumped as the door crashed open. A bolt of rainbow haired Pegasus zipped through the frame. “I got him, Princess!” she announced loudly.

Luna set a hoof on her chest attempting to calm her frantically beating heart. “We thank you, Rainbow Dash. Your promptness is much appreciated.”

Shane shuffled in behind the young mare, looking like he was dragged out of bed. His boots were untied and un-bloused. His green shirt was un-tucked, and his beloved shotgun was slung lazily over his shoulder.

“Major...” she began. “We apologize for summoning you at this hour, but I am afraid I had little choice. You told us to call you if something happened.”

He didn’t favor her with a response, choosing instead to merely stare at her with sleepiness and poorly concealed confusion.

Luna continued on regardless. She gingerly picked up the tablet in her teeth to show the human. He accepted the tablet from the alicorn, with a small trace of confusion.

“So, what happened?” he finally croaked, poking the screen to life.

-Uplink Established.

-Broadcasting...

"That happened," Luna said plainly, sidling up to the human's side.

Shane chewed on the inside of his cheek for several seconds. He tapped experimentally at the screen for a few seconds before sinking into one of Luna's cushions surrounding a low dark table. He tapped away in silence for several agonizing moments, even going as far as to smack the device against the table several times. Luna waited patiently, worry twisting her stomach in painful knots.

Shane lowered the device, rubbing the back of his head with thoughtful slowness. "It's a mistake..." he said calmly. Luna wasn't entirely sure who he was talking to. "I mean...it has to be a mistake." He sounded considerably less sure the second time.

"...What does it mean?" Luna dared to finally ask.

"I'm not sure. I've never seen it do that," he admitted, rubbing the side of his face. "...gimme a minute to try some things." Shane gave another look at the screen. He poked and prodded, occasionally stopping to rub sleep out of his eyes. He turned to the dark princess after several seconds. "We're gonna need some coffee. This might take a minute."

The device made a soft pinging sound, drawing everyone's attention. The human's eyes fell on the screen. He whispered something to himself, before pulling the small black chip from its port. The screen went dark. Error flashed in bold angry letters.

"Major?" Luna prompted tentatively.

He finally turned to look the dark alicorn in the eye, adopting a very grave voice. "...You might wanna go wake up your sister..."

~~~~~

The demure earth pony suppressed yet another yawn, doing her best to look professional despite the late hour. She wasn't normally working the night shift. She only agreed to take the extra shift to

get an extra day off the following week.

The cart came to a stop, the sweet aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted from the trays stack atop. She hadn't the slightest idea why the Princess wanted so much coffee so late in the evening. She could hardly recall the Princess even liking coffee. She and her older sister had both ordered tea almost exclusively for the entirety that she had worked at the palace.

She pushed her thoughts aside as she made her way to the large set of oaken doors. She glanced idly at the guards on either side of the entrance to the princess' chambers. She wondered if there were usually so many. It wasn't by any means her first time delivering food to the royal sisters' rooms. She could ever only recall there being two guards on duty at any one time. There were currently six guards total. Three on one side, and three on the other. The two usual Lunar Sentinels stood as they always did outside Luna's door, but now there were also four Solar Guards standing opposite their darker brethren.

One of the Lunar Stallions nodded to her with all the subtlety his station commanded and she rapped gently on the heavy door. A few seconds passed before the brass handle began to glow a soft shimmering gold.

The door swung open only to release a cacophony of raised voices and arguing. The small earth pony plastered her ears flat against her head. Pushing the cart into the room full of crowded angry words.

~~~~~

Twilight watched as the human paced back and forth in the Lunar alicorn's room. An unlit cigarette dangled from his mouth, finger gliding hastily across the obsidian tablet. Shining Armor sat alongside her. The stallion yawned intermittently. On the opposite couch sat the guard Commander. They had sent word to the Griffon ambassador also, who sat by himself looking impressively wide awake.

"Explain it to me again." Celestia commanded. "What is your

machine doing?”

“It pinged...” he answered apprehensively, not bothering to cease tapping on the tablet.

“Meaning what?” she pressed.

Shane rubbed his eyes. “It’s-” he gestured with his hand absentmindedly trying to find the right word. “...talking.”

“Major...” Celestia began with deathly seriousness. “...Talking to who?”

Shane looked up from his tablet and returned the older princess’ gaze for several seconds before shrugging helplessly. “...I don’t know.”

“This is not a situation where ‘I don’t know’ is acceptable, Major!” she chastised with notable heat in her voice. “I need answers!”

“I’m working on it.” he assured, tapping furiously on his tablet.

“Well work faster!” the solar alicorn demanded.

“Do you wanna do this?!” the human shouted at the solar princess. “Quick question, who here knows more about emergency position indicating radio beacons than I do?” He looked around the room in an exaggerated fashion. “No one? No? Not a single one of you? Alright then. Until that answer changes,” he pointed a finger at Celestia. “You sit down and shut your mouth. I’m handling it.” The human sat back into his seat. “Magical ass horses...tell me how to do my job...” he muttered grumpily to himself.

A small rapping at the door drew their attention.

Luna promptly opened the door allowing a small earth pony mare to push in a small cart laden with steaming pots aromatic of coffee. Her ears were plastered against her head. Her eyes were subtly darting around the odd collection of creatures gathered in the Night Princess’ bedchambers, no doubt enormously confused by the strangeness of it all.

Celestia's face immediately became soft and approachable. "Thank you, my little pony. You are dismissed." Shane snorted at the sudden sweetness in her voice. But the mare merely curtsied and departed back through the door.

The human eyes the pots of coffee enviously but made no move for them. He took a calming breath before continuing.

Twilight took the opportunity to break into the silence. "So..." she began. "...correct me if I'm wrong but if all this thing is doing is sending out signals, then what's the big deal? What the harm in letting it talk to nothing?"

"There isn't any. But it's not just 'talking to nothing'," the human noted.

"Well then what IS it doing?" she asked exasperatedly.

He chewed the inside of his cheek nervously. "I think something's talking back."

"Who? There's no one out there." Twilight iterated making a vague gesture toward the sky.

"I don't know. I yanked the chip." he admitted. "Look," he began verbally backtracking. "It's probably nothing. It could be a malfunctioning receiver or maybe it's mistaking its own refracting signal for a response."

"Could it be your kind? Do they have the ability to track and reply to these signals."

"Yeah they have the ability, but it couldn't be them." Shane shook his head.

"Why not?" Celestia asked.

"Because Twilight's right. They aren't out there." He almost laughed. "It's not a human signal because there are no humans to send signals! ...Just me."

"What if there are?" Luna questioned quietly, drawing attention to

herself. “What if you never passed the transient barriers as we thought. What if you didn’t jump lifestreams but instead merely traveled a massive distance within a shared universe.”

Shane shook his head. “Even if that were true it still couldn’t be a human signal.”

“How can you be so sure?” Celestia asked, having cooled off slightly.

“It was only running for maybe two hours tops. There’s no way a radio wave could travel to another galaxy and back in that time. Whatever pinged us back was close...relatively speaking.” He explained.

“Is there a way to pinpoint it exactly?” Luna pressed.

“Sure... we’d have to turn it back on. It would take some time and a lot of fuzzy math, but we could lock it down.” He let that hang in the air for a moment. “But it does work both ways. I can find out where it’s coming from...”

“It could then be tracked back to us.” Celestia finished solemnly.

The human merely nodded before releasing a sobering sigh. “I need you to be brutally honest with me here.” he fixed the collected creatures with a serious frown. His tone of voice gravely and severe. “And I mean zero trace of deceit honest. Because how you answer this question will dictate how we deal with this problem.” He eyeballed the collected group once more. “Do you know of anyone or anything on this planet that has the resources or even the theoretical sciences to create or receive these signals, mechanically or magically? I don’t care how top secret or jealously guarded it is. I need to know about it right now.”

The room shifted uncomfortably in the following silence. Celestia cast a critical inward gaze. Reliable wired electricity had only become a recent development within the past few generations. Successful though it was, long distance communication was still mostly conducted via magic. The only time a hard line wire communiqué was feasible was in large cities where telegraphs could

be used in place of mail carries. But even then it was considered an inefficient costly luxury.

Surprisingly the reserved Griffon was the first to speak. He cleared his throat with discomfort. "At the risk of sounding overeager, if it will speed this process up I can say that no griffon devices to my knowledge posses the capability."

Shane stared down the griffon with a face of solid calculative stone. Analyzing the creature even for several dangerously uncomfortable moments after he finished speaking.

Celestia was impressed to say the least. The griffons were a proud race. Progressive though the Prime Minister was, a humbling statement such as that was a rarity for his kind. Few would admit to not being the best at something. Much of their society was built on competition, honor, and an absolute hierarchy of social standing.

The more she thought about it, the more sense it made that he and the human got along so fabulously. Griffin culture was militaristic by nature, something the Marine was familiar with. Her mind continued to draw connections between the two groups. Wondering idly what would have happened if Shane had landed in Griffon territory rather than Equestria. An immediate bloodbath, was her initial discernment. She could find no real flaw with it. If however they had managed to calm their baser instincts she couldn't help but imagine a partnership between the two would be exceedingly dangerous.

\*SNAP\*

"Hey!" The sharp pop brought her back from her daydreams and causing her to recoil as the human snapped in the princess' face. "I need you to focus here, princess."

Celestia shot the human a glare at the rude gesture, but didn't otherwise argue. She refolded her wings thoughtfully. "No," she finally admitted. "I can think of no one that posses such a thing." She leaned forward on her haunches, adopting a cautionary tone. "But understand, Major, that many bizarre and unexplainable magics permeate Equus. I can not say for certain that this...signal

isn't the result of some naturally occurring magical phenomenon."

The human nodded somberly, sitting down and rubbing his eyes. "How long until you guys have your little summit meeting?"

"A little over thirteen hours." Luna answered reflexively.

Shane sat on the edge of one of the sofas, resting his elbows on his knees and folding his hands neatly. "Alright, here's what we're gonna do. I'm going to lay out the options and you get to pick one. Option one; we turn it back on and try to trace the signal back to wherever it's coming from, running the risks of being backtraced, if we haven't been already." He eyed the collective as he spoke. "Option two; we smash the transmitter, bury our heads in the dirt, and pretend it never happened."

"But isn't that the only chance you have of being rescued?" Twilight asked tentatively.

Shane nodded somewhat sadly. "Yeah. But I'm not so selfish to think my rescue should come at the risk of a city full of people... ponies," he corrected with an annoyed arm wave. "I don't know what's sending those signals, Twilight," he held his hands up helplessly. "I don't know. Everything I know about this is a guess based off an assumption, based on a hunch."

"We shall turn the machine back on." Luna declared suddenly.

"Luna-" Celestia began warningly.

"No, sister," Luna interrupted. "We will not sit in our castle and hide. If this technology is as advanced as it seems then the Major's signal has already been detected. Destroying this beacon now only serves to blind us to potential threats. I do not truly believe the source of this signal to be malevolent in nature but if it is. I wish to see it coming. We shall turn on the machine and investigate it. Before it comes to investigate us."

The group sat contemplative for several agonizing seconds before the human spoke up.

"Alright then... objections?" he asked fingering the small black chip



apprehensively.

"I could fill volumes with my objections," Celestia noted sourly. "But I believe Luna is right. Hazards notwithstanding I don't think we can afford to ignore the issue."

The human nodded and pushed the small chip into its port on the side of the tablet. "Buckle up, kids, we're going back on the grid." He pressed the black chip back into its port.

~~~~~

Twilight poured over several massive maps of Equestria. A large globe sat in the corner. Dozens of cartography tools, protractors, compasses, and charts littered the area.

After a bottlenecked lecture about planetary magnetic fields, units of measurement, and cardinal directions, Shane seemed fairly confident in his ability to trace the source of the signal. Twilight was all too happy to assist. He asked several questions about the atmosphere as well. Rainbow Dash was actually quite helpful. Her upbringing in Cloudsdale and her proximity to the weather factories coupled with her years managing various weather teams gave her an intimate knowledge of levels of all things ozone.

"You are certain you will be able to determine all of this information?" Magneus chimed in.

"Am I certain? No," he admitted turning his attention to the griffon. "But I'd say my odds of figuring it out are better than anyone else here. I'll get you close...close-ish," he corrected.

"What happens if we turn this back on and suddenly Equestria becomes the target for a fleet of human warships," Celestia asked coldly.

The human answered, apparently ignoring the bitterness in the alicorn's tone. "Best case scenario? I go home and your planet enjoys an era of unprecedented peace, security, and near godlike technological advancements under the care of the most powerful allies you have ever known."

“Worst case?” Luna asked rubbing her temples gingerly.

“Thermonuclear annihilation?” he shrugged uncertainly. Luna’s mouth gaped. “You wanted to know.” he defended. “The real answer is probably somewhere in the middle there.”

“Without the annihilation?”

“I mean...” he hesitated. “...maybe just like a little annihilation.” He held his finger and thumb close together. “A tiny tiny bit.”

“I swear by all that is good, human, if your little toy brings about any level of annihilation I’m holding you personally responsible,” Luna droned.

“Well that’s not really fair,” he frowned. “You were there when I was setting it up. I flat out told what it was and what it did. Where was the concern then, huh? I don’t recall hearing any royal objections before,” he pointed.

“Well we didn’t think it would work! We were certain you were merely delusional about its success, and we hadn’t the heart to tell you thine trinket was a waste of time and effort!”

The corner of his mouth lifted with amusement. “What did we learn?” he asked patronizingly.

~~~~~

Several dozen painful moments had passed as the small device resumed its previously abandoned task. The excitement had slowly drained from the collected group as the hands on the clock slowly ticked away toward the rapidly approaching morning.

“I was expecting something a little more exciting.” Rainbow Dash complained.

The human was pouring his way through another pot of coffee. “Gotta wait for the ping to...uh... you know ping.” He yawned, struggling over his words.

“Well how long does that take?” she complained.

He shrugged, walking over to the glass door leading to Luna's veranda. He cracked the glass door and lit a cigarette, careful to hold the smoldering tobacco outside. Luna frowned, at the minimal adherence of her 'no smoking inside rule'.

"Major Doran?" Magneus spoke up curiously.

"Hmm?" the human responded over the rim of his coffee cup.

"What exactly did you mean when you said ...thermonuclear annihilation?" he struggled with the words slightly.

He groaned through the cigarette in his mouth. "You guys really wanna get into this right now?"

"Do you have somewhere else to be?" Celestia encouraged.

Shane blew some smoke out his nostrils. "Let's just say human;s developed a weapon. A very powerful very scary weapon... And lots of them."

"Powerful enough to destroy an entire nation?" Luna asked doubtfully.

Shane snorted. "Enough to destroy an entire planet."

Luna balked for a few seconds. "That's impossible."

He shrugged going back to his cigarette. "Okay.."

"How?"she demanded.

"I'm not telling you. Because if I do, one of you jackasses is eventually gonna go try and build one." He leaned back against the wall giving her his full attention. "Trust me, Blue, it's not something you want to know. They were built under the pressure of one of the darkest periods in human history. The entire world was at war. We built them...and we used them. Hundreds of thousands of people died. Thousands more died from the fallout. Most of them civilians." He dragged on his cigarette, blowing the bluish gray smoke out the door. "It ended the war," he nodded gravely. "But the cat was out of the bag now. And we built more... better, faster,

and deadlier. Then spent the next hundred years regretting it.” The human flicked his cigarette off the balcony. “So I suggest you just take my advice and drop it.”

“I can’t very well drop it, knowing that this beacon could bring these weapons to my doorstep.” Luna countered quietly. “Can you stop them? How do you defend against such a weapon?”

The human shook his head at the alicorn sadly. “You can’t.”

“Hey!” Twilight interrupted. “It’s doing something!” She declared, hovering over the tablet.

“FINALLY!” Rainbow Dash declared agonizingly.

The human downed the last of the coffee in his mug. “Try not to think about it,” he advised the lunar princess before scurrying over the tablet. “Scootch,” he waved the small purple unicorn out of the way.

He began to tap wildly across the screen as the room’s onlookers waited with poorly concealed apprehension.

“What does it say,” Twilight finally dared to ask.

The human rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Nothing helpful...” he complained. “Normally it can give you the grid of the station that pings you. But it’s got no map to reference and no satellites to orient to, so it’s all just a buncha zeros.” He began tapping again. “But I can try defaulting ...” he said quietly, somewhat to himself as he tapped away. “Bamcis!” he scrambled over to the map, using a small reference legend Twilight had made to space a compass. He began drawing circles around Canterlot with the castle at the center. “We’re not getting the UHF or VHF freqs which means it’s not close enough for line of sight. No real surprise there...” he added on. “But that also means we’re picking up a propagated signal.”

“Please give us the Equish version, Major...” Celestia panned.

He nodded, still drawing on the map. “It’s uh... far away...but it IS almost definitely coming from THIS planet.” Celestia didn’t know if

that relieved her or not.

He prodded and scribbled for several more agonizing moments.

“Okay...” he wiped his forehead. “I got a direction. Kind of a cone of influence really though. At these kinds of distances were gonna need another reference point to narrow down the area.” The human drew a straight line from Canterlot through the eastern pass and well through Whitetail wood.

“What’s there?” he pointed at Whitetail Wood.

“Nothing really,” Celestia admitted. “...just forest. A few small villages at most.”

He scratched the back of his head. Tracing a final solid line along the map. “Well... I got a heading. We’re going to need at least one more point to reference...then another if you want a tighter grid.” He sniffed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “How much time we got left?” he asked the lunar princess.

“A little less than twelve hours,” she answered.

“We still have some last minute preparations to make,” Celestia warned. “That will take time.

“I still have reports to file. I haven’t even begun to explain your existence to the queen much less this debacle.” he said somewhat to himself.

The human scratched his nose. “Alright, gang...” he clasped his hands against one another. “We’re splittin’ up,” he pointed at the griffon ambassador. “You and Sunny go prep your shit for the summit. Luna ...and I guess you two,” he gestured at Twilight and Rainbow Dash, “...are gonna come with me. We gotta get outside the city and set up another relay. Shining Armor if you could go into the woods and die quietly... that would be just super.”

Twilight swatted the human with a rolled up map and shot him an angry glare.

“What?!” he asked incredulously. “I was just joking,” he affirmed.

He turned to the stallion shaking his head refutably.

~~~~~

The human threw his bag onto the magical celestial carriage and pulled the folded map from one of his many pockets. He made his way to the lead pair of Pegasus guards as they finished strapping themselves into their harness.

“Alright gents, check it out, should be pretty cut and dry. I need you to take us forty miles north of here. It has to be forty miles on the dot or I’ll have to do my math over again and I’m not doing that. You pick an LZ and I do my thing. After I get what I need it’s a straight shot back here. Easy day right?” The guard pursed his lips and nodded at the deceptively simple flight plan.

“You’re looking at about an hour or so of flight time, here and back. Assuming we don’t come across any nasty headwinds.” He informed the human who nodded in return.

“That’s fine. Just as long as you can get us there and back in one piece.”

“That’s one thing I can damn near guarantee,” the lead stallion boasted.

“Well then spin em’ up, Balto. You’re on my time now.” He stood and adjusted the shotgun slung over his shoulder. The human had deemed the adventure outside the castle walls sufficient enough to warrant his full array of arms and armor. Ceramic ballistic pads adorned his shoulders and upper arms, covering the areas the plate carrier left exposed. The padded yoke that covered his throat was unclasped and hung loosely down his chest. Luna noted mentally that she had never really seen him use it. She imagined it would be difficult to move one’s head with the thick ballistic collar fastened.

“I didn’t think we would see you willingly get back on Celestia’s carriage, Major.” Luna mentioned smiling at the human.

“Why’s that?” he asked absentmindedly as he picked up Twilight and deposited her onto the carriage. Much to her apparent squirmy

displeasure.

“Well, your past two encounters were...less than favorable...” she recounted.

“Why do you think I brought you?” he responded with a smarmy grin.

She blinked a few times, not understanding the implication.

“Because you clearly need us? Because we are clearly a valuable asset to you and your endeavors and would be lax upon you to leave us behind?” she pursed her lips. “Stop us when we guess it.”

Shane twisted and eyeballed the alicorn with a raised eyebrow. He shrugged and stepped onto the celestial chariot. “Whatever lets ya sleep at night, I guess...”

“Are you trying to hurt our feelings, Major? Have you forgotten that you seem unable to navigate your way out of a wet paper bag without us leading the way,” she questioned haughtily stepping onto the carriage behind him.

“I brought you for one very important reason,” he began as he settled down against his pack as an impromptu backrest.

“Do tell,” she prompted as she circled around nestling down on the cushioned place beside him.

He wrapped an arm around the alicorn’s neck hugging her head to his chest and rustling her ethereal mane with his free hand.

“Because you, my adorable little princess, are a walking talking blue feathery sleeping pill. And are therefore my first class ticket to unconsciousness-ville during our adventure on this hellacious nonsensical vehicle.”

The sputtering alicorn managed to pry herself out of the human’s arms. She refolded her now ruffled wings and blew the errant strands of hair from her eyes. “You only brought me because you wanted me to put you to sleep for the ride?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” he nodded.

“Well now we refuse,” she stuck her nose in the air. “Until you learn to express affection in ways that does not ruin our mane.”

The human snorted and leaned over murmuring something in Twilight’s ear. The unicorn blushed furiously and jammed a hoof in her mouth to prevent any laughter from escaping. She did her best to shoot the human a disapproving glare, which only succeeded in intensifying his chuckling.

“What did he say!?” the princess demanded.

Twilight forced the smile off her face and looked at her hooves. “Umm...”

“I’ll tell you when you’re older,” the human interrupted. He stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled to the prismatic pegasus circling overhead. “You comin’ with us or you flyin separate?” he shouted.

Rainbow Dash made several more lazy circles as she descended, landing gently upon a cushioned corner of the chariot. “I guess I could take a break,” she smiled settling in.

Shane donned his sunglasses and unbuckled his helmet from his pack. “You boys ready?” he shouted toward the team of pegasus guards.

“Yes, sir!” the lead stallion answered enthusiastically.

“Hit it, we’re on the clock.”

The chariot lurched forward causing the human to sink into his seat uncomfortably. He grabbed Luna’s starry tail, and hugged a large bundle of it to his chest.

“What are you doing?” she asked trying to keep the amusement from her voice.

“You failed as a sleep aid, so now you’re my seat belt. If I fall off I am going to drag you down with me.”

“You would not survive the attempt.”



“Now you’re gettin’ it.” He smiled, further entangling himself into the princess’ ethereal tail.

~~~~~

Solstice scanned the treetops diligently, feeling his way through warmer currents of air. His harness kept him in place in front of the chariot. “We should be able to land in one of the field up north. The forest isn’t too densely packed, keep an eye out for openings.” The lead stallion said over the rushing wind.

His partner nodded, not bothering to answer out loud.

Solstice gave him a concerned look. “Hey Ash, you feelin’ alright?”

He nodded again. “Yes. Fine.”

Solstice turned to look at the two pegasi harnessed behind them. They gave a clueless shrug that seemed to say, Just leave him alone, He’ll snap out of it.

Ashy was a younger stallion. He had only been in the guard for maybe a year or so, his innate talent for flight landed him a position on Celestia’s chariot team. Supposedly he was a prime choice for the Wonderbolt Academy, but had chosen a life in the guard instead.

Noble, but Sol couldn’t help but think something was off with the pony. He’d hardly said a word all day. He wasn’t the bubbliest pony but even he wasn’t usually this stoic. Something was troubling him.

Solstice shook his head. Ash’s business was his own. It wasn’t his place to pry. He probably just needed his space.

~~~~~

“Shark?” Dash asked.

“Yes,” the human answered.

“Cows?”

“God yes,” he laughed.

“Kangaroo?”

“Yes,”

They had been going on for nearly twenty minutes. It started out with Dash asking the human some rather invasive questions about carnivores. The conversation had since evolved into more of a lightning round of animals Shane had personally eaten, sometimes describing the taste of his favorites. Twilight was doing her best to ignore the increasingly macabre questions.

“Duck?”

“Yes,”

“Oh come on! You could seriously eat a cute baby duckling?!”  
Twilight interrupted horrified.

“Not really ducklings,” he assured. “Fully grown ones. The babies haven’t got nearly enough meat on them to be worth the effort.”

Twilight made a gagging gesture with her tongue, focusing instead on the passing greenery.

“Manticore?”

“No Manticores where I’m from.”

“Uhhh....Ostrich?”

“Yes.”

“Seriously?”

“Mmmhmm,” he nodded. “Dried and smoked.”

“Geez, I’m running out of animals,” she complained. “Crocodile?”

“Yep, and alligator,” he answered preemptively.

“So what does horse meat actually taste like?” she asked slyly.

“Sweeter than you’d think, not very fatty, a bit gamey...” he paused suddenly, realizing what he had done. He winced, turning to see the three mares looking back at him with aghast faces and open jaws.

“We thought you said you never consumed the flesh of ponies...”  
Luna seethed.

He coughed into his fist and rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah... but ...I uh...You know never uh...”

“You LIED?!”

“Just a ...little tiny bit!” he protested.

“TINY!?”

“Oh come on! What was I supposed to say? ‘Oh yeah it’s lovely to meet you, oh by the way your species is delicious.’ Not great for first impressions. I was in Paris and I didn’t know what I was ordering. This German couple next to us told me I was eating horse halfway through my steak.” He protested hotly. “So don’t give me this ‘holier than thou’ spiel. Tryna’ make me feel bad for eating meat is like me trying to make you feel bad for eating lettuce because there’s a universe out there where it’s sentient.”

“Soooo...” Rainbow started. “Did you finish the steak?”

“Hell yeah I finished that steak! I enjoyed it too.” He crossed his arms resolutely.

Luna looked away shaking her head. “I should have you muzzled.”

“You could try.”

~~~~~

Celestia set sorted through the list of confirmed attendees once more, racking her brain for any she may have forgotten. She stacked the odds as heavily in her favor as she possibly could. She made specifically certain that a few particular individuals would be in attendance. Those who were well connected to the press, those well connected in higher education, business, economics,

sociologist, scientists, diplomats... She grinned slightly. It was turning out to be a real 'who's who' of Canterlot elite.

A soft knock from her door drew her attention. Her horn glittered as she turned the knob. Shining Armor poked his head through the portal curiously.

"Hello, Captain," Celestia smiled softly.

The stallion returned her smile bowing his head respectfully. "Cadence's train is due to arrive soon. I'm going to the station to wait. I thought I'd extend the invitation if you wanted to get out of the castle."

She smiled at the stallion. "Thank you, But I'm afraid I have to finish this first. I hope Cadence won't be too upset with me."

"I'm sure she'll understand. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Celestia laughed and shook her head. "No, but thank you. I'll be done with this soon. Lest our new bipedal friend be taken away from us."

"If only I were so lucky, Princess," he added hopefully.

Celestia couldn't help but laugh. "Don't let him get to you, Shining. He likes you. No matter how vehemently he pretends not to." She paused to chuckle slightly. "I find myself increasingly convinced it is merely how males of his species play. He picks and fights at you because he wants to see you fight back. He does the same thing to Luna."

Shining Armor narrowed his eyes at the alicorn suspiciously. "With all due respect, Princess, I may have to disagree. His feelings toward me so far have been nothing but..." The stallion swirled his hoof in thought. "...I'm trying to think of a word harsher than hate."

Celestia chuckled again, her mirthful smile slowly becoming hesitantly meditative. "Make of it what you will, Captain. I may be wrong. But, as distasteful as I find it, I fear playing his little game may be the only way to earn his respect."

Shining Armor shot the alicorn an edgy half grin. "Are you telling me I need to fight the human for his respect."

Celestia shrugged her wings. "I certainly hope not. But I believe, Captain, that even if you don't, he will come calling eventually. If it weren't for the circumstances I'm sure he would have already. He sees you as untested, and will make it his personal business to correct that."

"How do you know this?" the stallion asked cautiously.

"I have met and fought with the warriors of many nations and many races, Shining Armor. Some more warlike than others. I while I make such assumptions with a measure of reservation, but I have no reason to believe this human to be any different."

Shining Armor nodded, already anxious with the implications. "You have given me something to think about, Princess. Thank you."

"Those are merely my thoughts on the matter, Captain. How you use those insights is completely up to you. Whatever you do choose to do, however, I encourage you to do it cautiously. There are still many things we do not know about this creature." She turned back to her papers. "Now," she continued, lightening her tone significantly. "...I believe you have somepony to meet."

Shining Armor smiled. "That I do, Princess. Unless you've changed your mind about accompanying me?"

Celestia returned the stallion's smile. "Go and greet your wife, Shining Armor. I shall see the two of you shortly."

The stallion nodded, bowing his head before turning to depart out the large oaken chamber doors.

~~~~~

An aimless little tune escaped the pegasus mare as she cantered down the corridor. It was really more out of boredom than any genuine love of singing. Like the reflexive urge to whistle on long walks. Sometimes it was just a good way to pass the time.

Sky Lily was her name, though contrary to tradition she actually had little to no natural talent at gardening, or flying for that matter, now that she really thought about it. No. She had found her calling, like many others, in the palace staff. It was an interesting job. It paid fairly well too. Her schedule shifted often, allowing the occasional changes of scenery. But truthfully that was one of the things she liked about it, it never got boring. General Services was the closest applicable position she could think to describe it. One week she might be delivering messages for the various clerks and offices inside the massive building, others she might be arranging books in the library.

Today however she was assigned to one of the few jobs she didn't like doing. Window washing. And if there was anything the castle had in spades, it was windows. Standard, stained, skylight, you name it, Canterlot castle had em' all. It was easy enough she supposed, but it was thoughtless, mind numbing work. The only redeeming factor she decided was the large amount of time it allowed for daydreaming.

Luckily she wouldn't be the only one. The castle staff comprised an army of ponies in of itself, entire sections dedicated to the upkeep of Canterlot castles' various shiny things. She was merely a stand in while another pegasus was on paternity leave.

Today she was responsible for the cleaning of the many high reaching panes near the guard's barracks. She stopped at one of the many sporadic broom closets which would house some clean rags and cleaner.

She stepped inside immediately noticing the somehow simultaneously damp yet clean smell of supply closets. She stepped inside waving a hoof blindly in front of her, hoping for a light switch of some kind.

Her hoof fell on something slick. She retracted it immediately cursing under her breath. One of the containers of detergent must have fallen from a shelf and broken. She flicked as much of the slimy substance away as she could before finally finding a pull string. She yanked it with a hoof to find the suspect puddle of green goop in the center of the floor.

She frowned as wheels began to turn in her mind. She didn't see any broken bottle parts. A loud smack of goo fell onto her nose causing her to jump back in surprise. She frantically wiped her nose free of the slime, casting her eyes to the ceiling in equal parts anger and confusion.

Her ears folded back in horror and her eyes as her heart iced over with fear. There was a stallion on the ceiling, cemented in place by the same solidified slime on her hooves. Her mind reeled. She did the only thing she could really think to do and screamed.

~~~~~

Rainbow Dash soared lazily through the sky above the wheat field. It was still quite early in the morning. The very edges of the sky were ablaze with pinks and soft yellows, pushing back the ink and stars. The sun itself, however had yet to actually breach the horizon.

The human sat cross-legged on the grass next to Twilight and the princess. Dash was more than content to leave them too it. They were using way too much math and Shane was using way too many made-up sounding sci-fi words to hold her interest.

A loud whistle snapped her back to reality. She dove for the ground, wind searing over her angled wings as the earth came rushing up to meet her. She flared her wings at the last second, landing in a graceful flurry of dust.

Shane clapped amiably, grinning past the cigarette in his mouth. Dash beamed and puffed up her chest in a very avian display of pride.

Shane stopped clapping and took a long final drag off his cigarette, throwing it to the dirt and grinding it under his boot. "Alright, hop on the bus, sister. We're done here."

"You're done? Already?" she asked. They had only been there maybe half an hour.

"Yep," he answered. "The first one was the hard one. This one was

pretty cut and dry.”

“What did you find?” she asked as she stepped up onto the platform with Twilight and Luna.

“We got it pinned down to a couple square miles. Which is pretty good considering the equipment were using...” he shrugged.

“So where is it coming from then?” she asked Twilight

Twilight snapped out of her thoughts, “Whitetail Woods actually,” she replied hesitantly.

Rainbow’s brow furrowed slightly. “I didn’t there was much of anything in Whitetail Woods other than...you know...woods.”

“There isn’t,” Princess Luna chimed in looking thoughtful herself. “...which is troubling in of itself.”

“So we’re done?” Rainbow continued.

“No,” Shane said tiredly. Pushing his pack against the back of the carriage and replacing the polarized sunglasses over his eyes. “All we did was find out where it’s coming from. Not what’s sending it.”

“Has anything tried to trace our signal yet?” Luna asked uncertainly.

The human rubbed the side of his nose with his thumb, sniffing. “There’s no real way to tell for sure,” he replied. “But if I had to guess I’d say no.”

“What makes you think that?” Twilight piped up from her end of the carriage.

“Well,” the human shrugged against his pack. “For starters, our beacon is moving,” he shook the shiny thing a little before stuffing it back in his bag. “Theirs hasn’t moved. So either they haven’t bothered to figure out who we are... or it’s having trouble getting a solid fix on us... There could be a lot of reasons really...” he trailed off, thoughtfully.



“Is there no way to find out?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “Not anyway that you’d like at least.”

~~~~~

Aegis beat a healthy staccato out of the polished marble as he thundered down the hallway. A young female Captain keeping pace beside him along with a younger guard stallion the commander didn’t recognize.

“How many?!” he demanded, never slowing his pace.

“They’re changelings, sir. We don’t know for sure. One of the castle staff just found a guard unconscious in a broom closet wrapped in a cocoon. Definitely one...probably more.”

“How the hell did it get this far undetected?!”

“We don’t know, sir,” the younger mare replied. “We’re still finding out ourselves. All unit leaders are getting head checks and scans right now looking for any missing or disguised personnel. All legions are on lockdown until they’re passed over. Luna’s Sentinels we’re mostly asleep in the barracks already so they’ve been swept and mobilized. They are helping clear the castle right now.”

“What about the guard that was attacked. Has he said anything?”

“Last I heard he hadn’t regained consciousness yet,” she answered.

“Where is he? I want to be there when he wakes up.”

“Barracks aid station, sir. East wing. It’s close.”

“What about the Princesses?”

The stallion spoke up this time. “Princess Celestia has been informed and is assisting the lunar guard with detecting changeling magic. Princess Luna left this morning with the human on some mission. She’s due to return any minute now.”

“Send someone to meet her when she arrives. Inform her of the

situation and get her somewhere safe and get the human back to his cell. Go do that now. Captain you stay with me.”

The stallion saluted before sprinting off in the other direction. Luna would be fine with the human. That was one less thing for him to worry about. He swore under his breath. If there was a worse time for this to happen, he couldn't imagine it.

The older stallion ignored the ache in his muscles as he continued to pump his legs forward. He wasn't exactly a young colt anymore, and his paperwork heavy position had taken its toll on his endurance over the years.

The Commander didn't bother returning the salute of the two solar guards standing watch outside the medical bay doors. “Where is he?” Aegis demanded upon breaching the portal the captain hot on his hooves.

A young medical officer sprang to answer him. “This way, Sir. He's just opened his eyes.”

The Commander followed the young medic into a tiny patient room where the stallion lay holding his head between his hooves and blinking rapidly.

Aegis cantered over to the side of the bed. “You alright, son?” he began slowly.

The dazed stallion turned his head grimacing as he continued to blink. “S-Sir...”

Aegis placed a hoof on his shoulder. “Easy...” he soothed. “Just tell us what happened.”

“I...I don't...remember...”

Aegis sighed in aggravation. The medic pony beside him began to speak. “Could be a result of the venom in his system. It's a non-fatal paralytic. It's been known to cause short term memory loss.”

“What's your name, son? You remember your unit?” The Commander pressed impatiently.

“My name is Ashy...” he said shakily but without uncertainty.  
“Celestial Escort Team Two...”

~~~~~

Cadence stepped off the platform, flanked by a pair of crystal guards. Several attendants in the train car behind them began unloading her luggage to be taken to the castle.

She spotted her husband waiting a few yards away with a patient smile. She left her guards behind flaring her wings and collided into her husband. Throwing her hooves around his neck.

“Hey, Sweetie,” he said nuzzling his cheek into hers.

Cadence retracted from her husband, shooting him a slightly angry glare. “Don’t you ‘Hey sweetie’ me, mister!” She poked him in the chest, doing her best not to laugh at this confused face. “I TOLD you something bad was going to happen on this trip didn’t I?! Admit it”

“That’s not really fair...”

“I said, ‘Shining Armor I have a bad feeling about this, something terrible is happening...’ And WHAT did you say back to me?!”

The stallion rolled his eyes. “I said it was probably nothing and don’t worry about it.”

“And was it nothing? Hmmm? Was it nothing Shining Armor?” The princess of love poked him in the chest a few more times to get her point across.

Shining Armor laughed sorely, backing away from his wife’s poking hoof. “Okay you were right...it wasn’t nothing.”

She beamed proudly. “That’s right,” she affirmed resolutely. “You’d think after all this time you’d have learned to listen to you wif-MMMMmmm-”

Shining Armor pressed his lips against the alicorn’s, silencing her mid-sentence. Her eyes temporarily surprised fluttered shut after a few moments leaning into the kiss and forgetting whatever

unimportant words were in her head.

Shining Armor finally pulled away from Cadence, albeit reluctantly. The princess of love stared dreamily back at her husband who smiled softly back at her. Married for years and the stallion could still give her butterflies.

"I missed you," he said quietly, touching his nose to hers.

"Mmmm," she nuzzled her husband in return humming happily. "I missed you too..." She snapped back to reality. "Don't go thinking you can just kiss your way out of all our arguments."

"Only when I have to," he grinned boyishly. "Come on, let's get to the castle. It's gonna be a long day..." he sighed tiredly.

Cadence dismissed her guards, much to their displeasure, and followed her husband toward the castle. The streets were still mostly empty this early in the day. The occasional passing stallion or mare would catch sight of them and bow or offer them friendly greetings.

"So...did I read that letter correctly?" she asked cautiously, wary of prying ears.

"You did..." Shining confirmed sourly.

"And am I to assume that what was written in that letter is to be taken literally and could in no way be confused with any synonyms or allusions to something less...fantastical?"

"You are..." the stallion once again confirmed.

Cadence sighed shakily. "It doesn't seem real," she commented somewhat to herself. "It's like somepony took a science fiction book and brought it to life. What's it like?"

"Unpleasant," he offered distastefully. "To put it very very lightly."

Cadence didn't seem too concerned with his response. She sidled up next to her husband almost whispering. "Is it scary?" she questioned with a grin.

He couldn't help but smile back a little. "In a way, yeah."

"In what way?" she pressed.

He sighed searching for the right description. "It's kinda like being on a hoofball team. Except one of the players is an unstable violent alien who could possibly snap and eat you at any random moment..."

Cadence blinked and raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure it's not that bad. There isn't a creature alive that I can't win over," she announced proudly.

Shining shrugged helplessly. "You can't say I didn't warn you..." The stallion looked around at the noticeably busier streets. The sun was fully crested now, and the closer they came to the castle, the more crowded it became. "Although I will admit it seems to be just me he isn't fond of."

"Just you? Why doesn't he like you?" she asked confused.

Shining Armor laughed humorlessly. "That's a whole other can of worms..."

Cadence stopped and frowned. "Shiny, what did you do!?"

"Me?! I didn't do anything! He's just insane!"

"You're telling me he just decided to not to like for no apparent reason..." she panned.

"YES!"

. Cadence rolled her eyes somewhat. "Where is it now?" She dropped the subject secretly wondering if her husband had committed some alien faux pas for her to rectify.

"They should be back any minute... If they aren't already-"

Several sharp reports echoed through the city, interrupting the stallion mid-sentence. Followed by another. The surrounding ponies looked around in confusion. The echo made it difficult to tell

exactly where they had come from.

“Were those fireworks?” Cadence asked. “It’s a little early isn’t it?”

“I don’t think those were fireworks...” Shining frowned. His gut twisted with anticipation. He couldn’t quite place it though.

“I wonder what it was...” she commented idly not thinking much of the noise. “Shiny?” she looked behind her to see if the stallion was following. He was looking at the sky, his ears swiveling cautiously. A minute passed before Shining Armor apparently snapped back to reality.

“Honey...” he started, distracted. “Go ahead and get to the castle. I’ll meet you there, okay?”

“Is...Is everything alright?” Concern entered the alicorn’s voice. Shining Armor wasn’t one to be paranoid. So such behavior usually warranted a fairly good reason.

“I’m sure it’s fine. But I’m going to go make sure. Just... fly ahead to the castle and find Twilight. I’ll be there soon.”

“...Okay,” the alicorn relented. All the good feelings in her chest were slowly replaced with uncertainty and an unsettling spark of fear.

Shining Armor forced a smile and pecked his wife on the lips before turning around and galloping toward the other side of the city.

~~~~~

The carriage jostled as the wheels rushed to catch up with the sudden earth moving beneath them. The stallions in their harnesses pumped their legs and wings in an attempt to slow the carriage in the narrow landing strip that was the castle courtyard.

“...and she has always wears a pith helmet and she explores ancient ruins and fights evil-”

“Indiana Jones...” The human interrupted.

“What?” Rainbow paused, confused.

“You stole the plot from Indiana Jones,” he said pointedly.

“I did not!” she objected hotly.

“Yes you did. That’s just a watered down version of Indiana Jones.”

“Watered down!?” Rainbow sprang up alert and argumentative.

“Oh geez...” Twilight rubbed her temple preemptively. Rainbow got abnormally defensive about this kind of stuff.

“Let me guess...” he said setting Luna’s tail off to the side. “She has a whip... a university professor in her spare time, oddly attached to her hat, plunders ruins avoiding booby traps? How am I doing? Am I Close?”

Rainbow’s mouth worked for a moment with apparent surprise. “Someone already told you didn’t they!”

“No. That’s Indiana Jones. It’s a blatant rip-off.”

“It is NOT! I know the author! She didn’t steal the plot from anyone!”

The human rocked to his feet, stretching his arms behind his back. “Yeah well you might want to tell her to stand the fuck by because if I ever get home I’m tellin’ Disney and they’re gonna sue her balls off.”

The human tossed his pack onto the ground below. He stepped off the platform of Celestia’s carriage behind his bag.

“A.K. Yearling is a girl. She doesn’t have balls.” Dash said pointedly, perching atop the human’s shoulders like a massive azure bird.

The human reached up and scratched at the pegasus’ chest and neck while her wings fluttered excitedly. “Well A.K. Yearling has clearly never met Disney’s legal team. They’d get her a pair just so they can take them away...”

Luna dismounted the chariot with an odd look. She scanned the courtyard and battlements. "Where is everypony?" she asked quietly.

"Is something wrong, Princess?" Twilight asked upon noticing the alicorn's concern.

"We are... not sure," Luna admitted. Something definitely felt wrong. Call it ancient intuition...her years had given a rather keen sense for danger. And while nothing seemed out of place, she couldn't help the feeling creeping into her gut.

She looked back at the group. The girls would be safe with the human and Celestia's guards so nearby. She turned to Twilight. "I am going to check on something. Please remain here until I return. I shan't be long."

Twilight seemed concerned but nodded her understanding. Luna spread her wings and launched herself into the sky. Twilight squinted and shied back from the upkick of dust.

"What got into her?" Shane asked as he sidled up to Twilight. The prismatic pegasus still perched over his shoulders.

A loud irritating beeping noise interrupted the human. Dash flitted to the ground as the human fished the tablet from his bag.

"What's it doing?" Dash asked preemptively.

"It's still pinging..." he said with tired concern. "I left it on when we left. It's tallied four during the flight. All at ten minute intervals, down to the second."

The guards watched the group while unhitching themselves from the harness.

"Is the timing significant to you?" Twilight asked.

The human shrugged. "Not really the timing as much as the precision of it. I doubt anything flesh and blood has the patience or accuracy to transmit a signal burst every ten minutes on the dot..."



“Meaning what exactly?”

“It’s an automated response,” he said sourly.

“Automated?” Twilight asked, “...like a machine?”

The human nodded sourly.

“How can you be sure of all this?”

“Like I said, I can’t be SURE of anything....but it is strange....” He trailed off whimsically. “We’ll find out soon enough anyway. If it really is nothing... then good. If it turns out to be something... I guess we can burn that bridge when we get to it.”

The human yanked the small black chip from the base of the tablet.

Twilight trotted closer to the human. “What is that thing, Shane?”

He twisted toward the small unicorn. “The chip?” She nodded curiously. He sat on his heels to give the mare a closer look. He held the chip between his fingers. “It’s tough to explain...” he started rubbing the back of his head. “It’s kinda like a very small way of storing large amounts of information. It’s very very important though. This little thing is pretty much the only chance I have of getting home.” He held the chip up to look at it more closely. “It’s everything.”

A shadow came over the two, as Shane twisted to see one of the guards stepped unusually close. Shane shot the stallion an irritated look. “Can I help you?”

“Ash?” one of the other guards called. “What are you doing? We’re not done yet.”

The stallion’s eyes flashed a sickly green as its head snapped forward like a viper sinking his fangs into the humans forearm. Twilight shrieked and fell backwards.

Shane yelped in surprise, dropping the chip and cocking his fist back and slugging the stallion across the cheek. The ‘guards’ head snapped back, as the human scrambled to his feet, swearing and

bleeding everywhere. “YOU FUCKING BIT ME!”

The stallion recovered quickly snapping his head forward as a long bug-like tongue shot out and snagged the small black chip off the ground and sprinting toward the city.

“Hey! STOP! HEY!” the human screamed and he hastily drew his pistol, and rapidly cracked off three shots after the retreating stallion. The first two went low, sending splashes of dirt. The third ripped through the stallion’s flank. He let out a pained cry but continued to hobble forward. He suddenly burst into a conflagration of green flames.

Shane’s jaw dropped. He blinked a few times before looking at his pistol incredulously.

Twilight shouted as the fire died to reveal a pitch black changeling. His bug-like wings began to pump as he took to the sky. “It’s a changeling!”

“A WHAT?!” the human screamed.

“I’m on it!” Rainbow Dash rocketed off the ground in pursuit of the changeling.

“Rainbow!” Twilight called in futile protest.

Shane snagged the shotgun from his back, shouldering the massive weapon.

Twilight jumped forward. “Shane, don’t! You’ll hit Rainbow!”

“No I won’t.” He sighted the retreating changeling and squeezed the trigger. The concussion from the blast nearly blew out her eardrums, which were already ringing painfully.

The buckshot tore through the creature’s already bleeding flank, shearing off one of his delicate wings. The changeling dropped from the sky like a sack of flour on the other side of the castle wall.

The human didn’t wait. He sprang toward the city, sprinting after the escaping bug.

“SHANE!” Twilight screamed.

“JUST GO GET SOMEBODY!” he ordered shouting behind his back.

~~~~~

Luna pumped her large azure wings, propelling her slim frame through the sky like a dart speeding toward the top of Canterlot Castle. She glided on warmer updrafts as she approached her elder sister’s balcony. The cold creeping feeling in her gut had yet to recede.

She stepped lightly onto Celestia’s balcony, carefully noting the continual lack of activity along the grounds. Her horn lit with cobalt energy as the large set of elaborate Prench doors swung outward. The lunar alicorn stepped into Celestia’s ornate chambers.

She scanned the quiet room. Celestia was nowhere to be found. “Sister?” she called in vain. The room was empty. Luna’s brow furrowed. Her sister’s desk was littered with papers. A large phoenix feather quill laid lazily over a half finished document, slowly dripping onto the parchment. Celestia was many things... but messy was not one of them.

Luna froze as three distinct cracks echoed from the open veranda. She raced back out to the balcony, her ears swiveling attentively, as dread crept into her heart. Another menacing concussion came from below. She launched herself over the balcony pumping her wings furiously against the morning air. She cursed herself in her mind for leaving the human unattended.

She banked around one of the many towers finally setting eyes on the field in which they landed. The human was gone, as was Rainbow Dash. Twilight was galloping toward the castle as if her life depended on it.

The alicorn slammed into the ground in front of the lavender unicorn, her powerful muscles absorbing the force of impact. Twilight skidded to a halt in front of the alicorn.

“Princess!” the unicorn was practically in tears.

“What happened?!” Luna demanded. “Are you alright?”

“I’m f-fine,” she assured. “But, Princess, we were waiting for you and ...and one of the guards! He...he...”

“Calm thyself, Twilight Sparkle.” The alicorn soothed.

“It was a changeling!” she blurted. “It bit Shane and took his chip and tried to fly away but he shot it down and he and Rainbow Dash ran after it, they heading toward the city!”

Luna swore every foul word she knew, and several that she made up specifically for the occasion.

“What do we do!?”

“Go and get Celestia, Twilight Sparkle, go now! We shall hunt down the human.”

Twilight nodded, before disappearing in a flash of purple magic.

~~~~~

“I think it went this way!” Rainbow called down to the human who was running below her. The changeling had made it to the city.

“What do you mean you think?!” he called up after her as he careened around and sometimes over random ponies, almost all of which screamed or ran at the sight of the enormous biped, racing down the streets.

She scanned for any trace of the downed bug, cursing to herself for losing it. The human below was somehow keeping an impressive pace considering he only had two legs to run on. She supposed it had some advantages. He took turns and curves like a champ, and was surprisingly agile. Although she doubted he would be able to run like this for very long.

A flash of green caught her eye. “Gotcha!” The wounded creature couldn’t maintain a disguise. “Take a left!” she called below.

The human darted around the corner. “MOVE!” he screamed at the

mass of morning ponies. They scurried out of the way and the ones that didn't were either knocked down or jumped over as he plowed through the crowd like a bull.

The changeling ducked down an abandoned street, clearly desperate for an escape. He darted down an alleyway. Rainbow could see it was a dead end, but he couldn't. "Game over little dude."

The human caught sight of the bug as it darted into the alley. "STOP!" he demanded. The changeling continued to hobble as quickly as it could. Shane sprinted after him. "I SAID FUCKING STOP!"

The changeling ran into a wall. End of the line. He jumped as high as he could fluttering his useless ruined wings in a futile attempt to climb over. A forty-five caliber slug ripped through his knee sending green blood and shards of blackened carapace everywhere. The changeling let out an unearthly howl of pain as he slumped to the ground.

Rainbow landed at the end of the alley as the human descended upon his prey. The changeling lay twitching on the cold stone, clearly in a world of pain. Shane holstered his pistol, and wrapped his hand around the changeling's neck before slamming the bug's face against the unforgiving brick.

It coughed up a nasty combination of teeth and blood. Rainbow winced. She actually felt a twinge of pity for the bug. And she was no stranger to putting hoof to flank when it came to changelings.

Shane hooked the tip of his boot under the changeling, flipping it over on its back. "Who sent you?" he asked in a dangerously calm tone.

The changeling opened its eyes at the human. It made a series of foreign sounding hissing and clicking noises.

The human rolled his eyes. "In English! Who. Sent. You?"

The bug spoke the same unintelligible language.

The human slammed his boot down over the changeling's destroyed

knee. Rainbow had to cover her ears from the horribly pained noise that came from the bug. “ENGLISH!” the human screamed at the changeling.

“HIVE!” the bug cried. “THE HIVE!”

“What is that? What is the hive?!” he demanded.

“I – I have to get ...get back to the hive!” the bug cried through pained breaths.

“You’re not going anywhere until you give me back that fucking chip. Where is it?!”

“Can’t give...” it choked out.

“Would you rather die...here in a fucking alleyway?!” he asked opening his arms to his sides. “Give me. The motherfucking chip. Now!” Shane pulled the gun from its holster. “Or I will blow your fucking brains out and find it myself.” he pressed the cold barrel against the bug’s forehead. “It’s a thirty-cent bullet to me, chief. Just tell me what you did with it.”

The changeling shook either from pain or fear, Rainbow couldn’t tell. It opened its mouth and shut it repeatedly.

The human cocked his head at the action. “Did....” he looked the creature up and down. “...did you fucking swallow it?”

The changeling nodded.

“YOU SWALLOWED IT!?” he screamed, shaking the bug with rage. The creature muttered something in its native tongue, but nodded again.

Shane stepped back, re-holstered his pistol, and drew the long combat knife from his belt. “Worst mistake you ever fuckin’ made...” He descended on the downed changeling, as it shrieked and squirmed in horror.

“MAJOR!”

The human twisted and leveled his forty-five at the lunar Princess. "Major, stop this..." She froze mid-step when she realized he wasn't lowering his weapon. His arm was oozing blood from two puncture wounds near his wrist. "Shane..." she began tentatively. "Calm down."

"Go home, Luna. I'm handling this."

"Gutting a changeling in the middle of the city is hardly what we would call handling it, Major. We can deal with this...but not here. We have to get back to the castle. You're wounded and there are too many eyes here."

Shane eyeballed the princess for several seconds before finally nodding and lowering his pistol. He stood and brushed himself off. "You live to die another day, buggy."

Luna lowered her wings and let out a pent up breath. She turned to the somewhat sick looking pegasus. "Are you unharmed, Rainbow Dash?"

She started at the mention of her name. "Oh...uh...y-yeah. I'm fine," she assured.

"Thou should fly back to the castle and get cleaned up, you look ill," the princess suggested.

"A-Alright..." the pegasus leapt into the air, sailing toward the castle.

Luna retuned her attention to the human. He reached down and wrapped a fist around the changeling's twisted horn. He began to drag the bug back out the alleyway by its horn. Luna winced. "We should teleport the changeling back. Fewer will see."

The human didn't stop. "I'm not teleporting. And this thing isn't leaving my sight until it's locked in an iron box." He left the alley dragging the changeling by his side like somepony might drag luggage.

~~~~~

Shane lugged his way back toward the castle eliciting cries of alarm and terror along the way. Partially because of his imposing nature... but mostly it was because of the half-dead changeling drone that he was dragging by the horn like it was a perfectly normal thing to do.

“Sorry...Excuse me....Coming through...I know, don’t worry about it. It’s okay everybody I’m an American no need to panic....Lookout... that means get out of my way.” He said as he skirted around the ponies bold enough to not immediately leap out of his path.

Luna followed several feet behind in a perpetual state of facehoofing at the human making the situation as messy and showy as possible. Murmurs from the crowd were mixed. Some were bewildered by the bipedal creature, others were fixated on the changeling. The attack on Canterlot a few years prior was still relatively fresh in their minds. There were few creatures on Equus that ponies came to fear and hate more so than changelings. The crowds seem torn between their fear of the new bipedal creature, and their delight that he seemed to hunt the parasites that plagued them.

“Princess!” Luna turned to see Shining Armor skid to a halt by her side.

Shane twisted toward the new arrival. “Armor!” he greeted sounding deceptively friendly. “How nice of you to join us! Look what I caught!” The human lifted the changeling by his horn like a fisherman showing off his catch.

The stallion sputtered for a response. “That... a changeling?!” he blurted.

“So it would seem,” the alicorn sighed. “There go our plans for the immediate future.”

“Yeah, the little sucker bit the shit out of me, stole my macguffin, and tried to book it through town.” He hefted the half conscious bug higher, meeting its face with his. “Yeah! You fucked up didn’t you?” the human squeezed the bug’s face with his free hand.



Shining Armor leaned toward the princess. “Why does he seem so happy?” he muttered.

“We could only fathom a guess, Captain.” She answered honestly. The human did seem inordinately pleased. She assumed it was merely in his nature to hunt and fight, and he finally had the opportunity to do so. Although it seemed rather one sided to her.

The three passed through the castle gates, the massive oaken doors began to close behind them. The human didn’t seem to care, or even notice for that matter.

Twilight suddenly appeared in a flash of violet light, causing the human to swear and recoil in surprise. “Shane!” she exclaimed.

“Twilight!” Shining Armor burst forward.

“Shiny!” The stallion wrapped his hooves around the smaller mare.

“Are you alright?!” he began looking over his baby sister protectively.

“I’m fine,” she assured. “Are you? What happened? Where’s Cadence?”

“I told her to come find you,” he explained. “Is Celestia here?”

“She’s out looking for all of you.”

There was a massive thud as the solar alicorn slammed into the ground a few feet away. Her eyes were white hot with arcane power and steam rolled off her fur in waves.

“WHAT HAPPENED!?” the alicorn demanded.

Luna stepped forward, apparently the only one not gaping at the Princess of the Sun. “A changeling infiltrator snuck its way onto one of your chariot teams. He attacked the Major and attempted to steal one of his gadgets. It was shot down and tried to make its escape on hoof through the city. The human pursued it to an alleyway. That is where I found him...attempting to gut the changeling in broad daylight.” She shot the human a disapproving look.

The human showed no trace of remorse. "I still would like very much to gut him, actually. Just somewhere less observable..."

The alicorn sizzled with barely concealed power. "Was anyone hurt?"

The human let the changeling fall to the ground in a heap and held up his forearm, a slow stream of hot sticky blood still drizzled from the two puncture wounds. "I'll live..."

Celestia motioned her guards toward the changeling. "Take it to the medical wing in the dungeon." Two large stallions moved at her word, toward the immobile creature.

Shane stepped on the creature possessively, leveling his pistol at the approaching guards. "Ah ah ah...Nu uh. This is mine. Back off." They froze. He waved them away with the barrel of his gun.

"What are you doing?" she asked incredulously.

"The insect is mine." he stated with fatal seriousness.

"Shane, if we don't get it to the infirmary soon it could die."

Shane looked down at the bug under his boot. "And?"

Celestia seethed at the human. "Shane we don't have time for this. That changeling is a prisoner of the state and you have no authority to detain it without-"

"WHAT?!" the human interrupted. "I have no authority?! You lost your mind! He attacked me and stole top secret government property! His ass is mine!"

"He is an Equestrian prisoner! On Equestrian soil. And will face Equestrian justice."

"Fuck your justice!" He sneered. "I don't have time to pretend I give a fuck about your happy huggy bullshit right now! Especially when you all are the ones that let the little prick get this close in the first place."

Luna spoke up for the first time. "Major, Please calm down. I can understand thou art angered by this attack, as am I. But you unfairly lay the blame upon us. You are still ignorant of many things in this world. Changelings are born and bred to be the perfect spies. Taking any shape and any form to infiltrate and place. They are virtually undetectable, untraceable, and indistinguishable when disguised. We expunged them from Canterlot after they failed to take the capitol by force. "

The human's face didn't change, but the lunar alicorn could see the thoughts turning behind his eyes. "So..." he began, "...just kill it right now?" He thumbed the hammer on the pistol back and leveled it at the insect's head.

"No!"

"No!"

Both alicorns immediately objected.

"Well make up your minds!" the human said angrily. "Is it dangerous or are you incompetent. Pick one. Because either way, you still haven't given me a decent reason to hand this thing over to you."

"We cannot interrogate a dead changeling, Major," Luna stated plainly. The human chewed the inside of his cheek as he pondered the blue alicorn's words. "We will get your device back. And we will get the answers we seek. If you wish for the changeling to be your prisoner, very well. But if you wish to hold him in an Equestrian cell, in an Equestrian prison, on Equestrian sovereign soil. We withhold the right to make our own stipulations. Unless of course you wish to seek asylum elsewhere, or you know somepony who can understand the changeling tongue, or its general anatomy and abilities."

Shane stared unblinking at the lunar princess. "Fine," he finally relented. "But I get to interrogate it."

Celestia frowned at the notion. "We're not going to let you just beat it to death."

The human groaned like a teenager being grounded. “Why don’t you just kiss his boo-boos while you’re at it?”

The changeling made a squeaking noise as it reached toward the princess from the ground. “...p-please,” it choked.

Shane twisted his heel over the changeling’s destroyed wing causing it to shriek in horrific pain. “Shut up! Unless the next words outta your mouth are ‘Here is the microchip’ I suggest you keep it shut. Because the only thing keeping you alive right now is her,” he jabbed a finger at Celestia. “If I had my way you’d have been executed already.”

“One,” Celestia began. “You will not harm the changeling. That means no beatings, stabbing, shooting, burning, maiming, dismembering, or any physical violence of any kind while it is on my grounds. I will not stand by while you savagely torture an unarmed prisoner.”

“I don’t have to hurt it to make it talk...” he promised coldly.

Celestia continued. “Two. There will under NO circumstances be an execution of any kind. The death penalty has not been in practice for hundreds of years and I will not see it reinstated under my rule. And three, any information gleaned from the changeling is to be shared equally. Keep in mind you are not the only one it attacked. We need answers just as you do.”

Shane chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully with a sour look on his face. He looked back and forth from the changeling to the princess a few times before his eyes widened. He donned an evil smile that Celestia did not like one bit. “Fine.” He hooked the toe of his boot under the changeling, kicking it toward Celestia’s guards. “All yours, boys. It would seem I’ve been out-negotiated.”

The guards hefted the half-dead changeling onto their shoulders as the trekked it toward the dungeon complex that also served as the human’s temporary home. Celestia stepped toward him as he was igniting a cigarette. “Why must you make things needlessly complicated?”

Shane laughed through his cigarette as he leaned against the alicorn. "I'll be honest it took me a minute to figure it out... guess a princess can't get her hands dirty... hooves, whatever..."

Celestia cocked her head. "...figure it out?" she repeated.

He nodded, still grinning. "Every time I think I got you pegged..."  
He bumped the alicorn with his hip.

"You've completely lost me..." she objected, genuinely confused.

Shane dragged on the cigarette. "Yeah, good idea," he almost whispered. "Still a few too many ears around."

"I'm not being coy, Major. I have no idea what you are talking about. If you think I said any of that with an unspoken implication you're wrong. Everything I said is to be taken literally."

"And it will be. No worries, Princess," he smiled again. "I understand completely."

"Good."

He winked exaggeratedly at the alicorn.

Celestia's wings drooped. "Wait what was that for?"

"What was what for?" he asked innocently.

"You winked at me!"

"No I didn't," he assured.

"Yes you did! Major I am not joking do not hurt that changeling!"

"Alright! I won't!" he held up his hands.

Celestia narrowed her eyes at the human who still had too much of a smirk for her liking. "You better not."

"I'm not gonna hurt the changeling," he promised. And Celestia nodded.

He winked again.

“STOP DOING THAT!”

~~~~~

“We didn’t find any venom in your bloodstream,” the beige unicorn said finally. It was the same pony that had taken his blood a few days earlier. The human seemed rather pleased to see a familiar face among the doctors and nurses. “You’ll need to pay close attention to the site over the next forty-eight hours. If you experience any numbness or difficulty breathing please get yourself back here as soon as you can,” she implored. “I don’t know if you were exposed to the venom or not but we’re going to play it safe. You could have a delayed reaction, and I can’t say for sure how it might affect your species.”

“Okay...” Shane nodded as he watched the unicorn swab out the bite mark with some brown foaming liquid, most likely some kind of peroxide, and tape a few small squares of gauze over the two puncture wounds. He flexed his fingers experimentally. He cocked his head expectantly at the waiting mare. She rolled her eyes and levitated a piece of strawberry candy out of her bag. The human popped it in his mouth happily. He hooked an arm around the sheepish pony’s neck and pulled her into an impromptu hug. “Don’t tell the other ones, but you’re my favorite horse doctor,” he said quietly.

The unicorn giggled as she attempted to squirm away. The human held on tightly as he scratched the mare’s necks and ears affectionately. “Alright alright,” she protested. “You’re welcome. Stop, you’re gonna mess up my hair!” The human reluctantly released the nurse, who shook herself off and blew the strands of hair from her face. She shook her head at the biped, “Big teddy bear...” He crunched the shards of candy between his jaws. Her grin finally cracked as she laughed at the human. “You’re all finished, Major. Twilight is waiting for you in the lobby.”

The human stood, and left with only a thankful wave in farewell. He followed the helpful signs that directed him back toward the patient waiting area before stumbling into the room where, true to

her word, the purple magical horse sat and waited expectantly.

“All fixed up?” She asked.

“Mhmm,” he affirmed through a mouthful of something crunchy. Twilight didn’t bother to ask what it was. He held up his arm and gave a thumbs-up with his free hand.

“Does it hurt?”

He shrugged, noncommittally, still chewing away.

“Well, the Princesses have already left to prep for the conference. Apparently rumors of you have drawn quite the audience,” she explained as rose from her seat.

“Where’s my newest friend?” he swallowed.

“The changeling is most likely still in the medical wing of the dungeon. You did a pretty good number on him. He’ll never fly again, and the doctor said he’ll be lucky if he gets to keep his leg.”

Shane snorted. “He’s lucky he’s still breathing...”

Twilight frowned. “Either way. He’ll be locked away for quite some time I imagine.” She looked the human up and down. “Are you ready to go?”

“Do they need us at the conference?” he asked.

Twilight shook her head. “Princess Celestia wants to break the news to them herself. She thought you being there might complicate things,” she explained. “There will be plenty of time for you to stand on a stage. For now she just wants you to go recover and wait.”

“Should we go help?”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea, Shane. She seemed pretty sure she didn’t need you there. I think it might be a bit too shocking for some ponies,” the small unicorn warned.

The human nodded absentmindedly. “Alright. I’m gonna go get some sleep. I suggest you do the same. You’ve been up longer than I have,” he advised.

~~~~~

Celestia stepped from the stage. A cacophony of shouting and incessant questions and camera flashes followed her. The announcement hadn’t gone exactly as she had planned. It all went fairly well up until she had used the word “alien”. From that moment the collected scientists and reporters had for all intents and purposes lost their minds with a mixture of fear excitement and questions. She had expected as much, if she were being honest with herself. Luna had left only moments before her.

This was only the first step toward a more encompassing meeting. During her speech she covered many things about the human and his species. His technologies and insights. His intelligence and physiology. She even dared hint at the devastating military power his people possessed. This was merely the first crack in the ice. She saved the bulk of her true knowledge for the world stage. She intended to call to Summit the collected leaders of every nation on Equus. After all, the arrival of extraterrestrial life was a global concern. It was only fitting to call upon the attention of the entire globe.

Celestia sighed tiredly. It was not a meeting she was looking forward to. No doubt every newspaper in Equestria was about to run this announcement as their headlining story. It would be a blessed miracle if she had a few days before the letters and summons began to roll in from national leaders the world away. Some would be frightened...some would be angry. She was prepared to deal with both stances.

The solar alicorn stepped lively from the darkness of the backstage area. She had to check on Shane and the changeling before she could retire. Her horn lit with blinding astral energy, as she disappeared with a resounding crack.

~~~~~



Celestia appeared outside the dungeon complex. The tall foreboding obsidian structure never failing to send shivers down her spine. She fancied herself made of sterner stuff than to be moved so by a mere building. But the complex radiated a somber purpose and she couldn't help but respect its construction if nothing else.

A slow whistle brought her to her senses. "You'll have to teach me that trick someday..." the human said from his spot on the dungeon stairs, a smoldering cigarette stuck between his fingers. Two stoic guards stood at either end of the entrance.

"Hello, Major. How are you feeling?" she asked eyeing the newest bandages on his forearm.

"I'm fine," he waved off. "How'd it go?"

Celestia allowed her wings to droop slightly.

The human's grin faded slightly. "That bad, huh?"

"Not so bad as I might make it seem," she backpedaled. "It went as well as I could reasonably hope," she explained. "It is a big announcement. Ponies are frightened. Fear leads to irrationality. It makes it difficult to reason with ponies when their thoughts are on the safety of their family and foals."

The human nodded understandingly. "Where's your sister?"

"I had assumed she was here already. Is she not?"

The human shook his head and shrugged.

Celestia shrugged in return.

Shane smiled, burning the last bits of cigarette to the filter and grinding the butt under his boot. He nodded toward the dungeon entrance. "Come on," he prodded. "We got a bug with, what is sure to be, a very interesting story to tell."

The human stood and stretched. He groaned happily when several of his bones cracked in response. He twisted and revealed a large five gallon jug of water. The human hefted the large container and

started toward the door.

“What is the water for, Major?”

The human didn't turn to face her but the Princess could feel his smug grin from there. “There was a prison back on my planet...” he said whimsically. “The CIA nicknamed it Strawberry Fields after a famous song.” The human began to whistle an odd tune that the alicorn didn't recognize.

Celestia cocked her head at the retreating human. She trotted up the obsidian steps and entered into the darkened dungeon, following the hauntingly catchy tune of the whistling human as he trekked further into the dark.

~~~~~

## Author's Notes:

### POST

Its finally done. I think this chapter took me the longest of any of them.

For those of you that didn't read the blog post. This story and everything on my hard drive was nearly lost. Thanks to everyone that tried to help recover it. I don't know what I did to fix it, but something worked and now all of my shit is backed up and then backed up again. Wont be going through that again.

But anyway. There you go. I'm looking forward to a faster pacing story now. I've grown somewhat bored with sitting and talking. As much I as love the bants, I think a little balance is long overdue. Now that this is done I think I'm going to go on a small fishing trip. I'll check on you all when I get back.

[ARTICLE 2 TV Tropes Page](#)

# ARTICLE 2 Part XVIII

## ARTICLE 2

The Princess of love wandered idly through the halls of Canterlot castle. Her husband had suggested she find Twilight but had remained mute as to *where* she might begin to look. She wore her frustration plainly upon her face as worry continued to settle in her gut in a most unpleasant way. Shining Armor had run off into the city to investigate the commotion and she couldn't, for some reason, shake the idea that she was being intentionally left in the dark about whatever was going on.

“Cadance!”

The pink alicorn spun around only to find herself wrapped in a big purple hug.

“Twilight!” the alicorn acknowledged with delight as she returned the small unicorns embrace.

“Pinkie!” the bubbly earth pony announced excitedly as she bounced into the room followed by a posh white unicorn.

“Cadance, when did you arrive, darling?” Rarity greeted warmly.

“Pinkie, Rarity! Oh, it’s been so long.” she pulled the other two ponies into the hug before releasing them with a happy squeeze.

“I missed you, too,” Twilight giggled.

“I’ve been looking all over for you. Maybe you can finally tell me what’s going on here,” Cadance said hopefully.

Twilight sighed deeply. “... I don’t even know where to start.”

~~~~~

The complex went unused for the most part. Crime was not particularly high in Equestria and even then most lawbreakers were

sent to state-run correctional facilities. The dungeon on the castle grounds was largely a relic of the past that was maintained for emergency use rather than actual criminal justice purposes. Despite its infrequent and inessential use, the complex was actually quite modern. Popular rumor and vernacular led many to believe the building was a dark and damp stone storybook jail, complete with dripping walls, bars, and chains. It could not have been farther from the truth.

Celestia felt the anxious thrum of her heart beating as she watched the human through the glass. The open magical intercom system allowed her to hear everything inside and vice versa. He placed the large jug of water on a steel table, occasionally casting evil glances at the unconscious changeling detained on the bed. He had sworn up and down that no harm would come to the changeling, she even convinced him to submit to a lie detecting spell. He was telling the truth... or at least *he* thought he was. She reminded herself that his definition of “harm” was likely much more narrow than hers. Still, she was there to intervene if he crossed any lines. As much as she hated to admit it, they needed answers, and they needed them now.

Shane was disarmed... or as disarmed as could be. His firearms were entrusted to the solar alicorn along with his knife. His behavior was still troubling the princess to no end. He had never willingly relinquished his weapons under any circumstances. Yet now, while he was locked in a room with the only being he could reasonably call an enemy, he voluntarily surrendered them.

Celestia mentally slapped herself, returning her attention to the unicorn doctor as he droned for several moments, reading from a clipboard.

“It wasn’t as bad as we thought,” he assured. “Still not exactly good, mind you, but nothing we couldn’t handle. The changeling’s anatomy was tricky. Their ability to shapeshift mean their organs aren’t set in one place like most normal creatures. It’s one of the many reasons they’re so resilient. They can compress or expand their internal organs to better fit the size and shape of the pony they’re attempting to mimic.”

“What kind of recovery time are we looking at?” Celestia asked.

The doctor pursed his lips. "That's difficult to say with any certainty. We managed to save its leg. Changeling's don't have any real bones to speak of, so it's really only a matter of his carapace mending properly. He could theoretically be walking again in a few weeks...maybe a month or so. We couldn't do much for his wing though," the doctor admitted. "Changeling's are considerably lighter than ponies. Their wings are much more delicate. And well..." the doctor trailed off and looked at the human who looked up at the unicorn's implicating tone. "It was nearly blown off entirely..."

From his side of the window it was nothing more than a mirror. "...Are you expecting an apology?" his voice sounded odd as the magical speaker reproduced his voice.

Celestia shot him an icy glare that he couldn't have seen.

"Well..." the doctor continued regardless. "Needless to say he won't be flying again-"

"I don't need him to *fly*," the human interrupted impatiently as he eyeballed the unconscious creature.

The doctor shifted his weight awkwardly. "Well he can talk, if that's all you're implying. But I can't recommend-"

"I neither want nor need your recommendations," the human interrupted.

"W-Well yes, but he's not in any condition to-"

The human pushed himself to his feet excitedly hefting the water jug over his shoulder. "You still there, Princess?" the human asked the mirrored glass.

"I'm here, Major," she promised.

"Would you be a dear and send the good doctor on a coffee run or something for the next...oh...thirty to forty-five minutes?" he asked calmly.

"He's staying, Shane. If he so much as hints that you hurting that

changeling I'm going to have you chained to a post and flogged."

The human shivered exaggeratedly and cooed, "God, I *love it* when you talk dirty."

Celestia groaned and rubbed the side of her head while the doctor turned scarlet from his neck up. "I am serious, Major!" she snapped.

"Relax. It'll be *fine*. I seen this in a movie once," he assured "...so I'm basically an expert." Shane hovered over the unconscious changeling. "Hey," the human snapped his fingers in front of the bug's face. "Wake up.... *you!*" the human poked the insect's cheek a few times. The changeling remained fast asleep.

Shane looked around the room, examining the many tubes and intravenous bags that hung on silver stands over the bed. The human thought for a second before reaching up and seizing one of the bags and squeezing, hard.

The changeling shot up in bed as far as the restraints would allow, his blue eyes bulging in pain.

"SHANE!" Celestia yelled in protest.

The human released the bag and held his hands up innocently. "Whoops."

The changeling turned and saw the human towering over his bed, and began to weakly thrash. The various monitors he was connected to all began to beep and tick warningly.

The changeling started panic chattering in his native tongue, doing his best to create as much distance from the human as his restraints would allow.

The human whistled. "I think he remembers me."

The human pulled the pillow from under the changeling's head, ripping the case away and discarding the pillow itself over his shoulder. "Shut up." the human ordered over the changeling's distraught chattering. "I'm pretty sure we already discussed my distaste for languages I don't speak..." The human frowned

threateningly.

The changeling looked around frantically, chittering painfully.

“His magic is being suppressed, Major. He can’t morph his vocal chords anymore,” the doctor’s voice came through the speaker.

Shane’s frown deepened. “Can you understand it?”

“Um...W-Well yes, somewhat,” he admitted.

“Good. Translate.” Shane turned back toward the changeling. “Look at me,” the human ordered. “I’m gonna make this real quick and easy for ya alright? I’m gonna ask a question you’re gonna answer the question. Barney style. Nod if you understand.”

The changeling nodded.

“Good. Now if you lie to me or in any way attempt to jerk me around or waste my time, I’m gonna break your legs. You understand?”

The insect’s eyes bulged.

The human nodded. “Good. We’re gonna get started.” The human pulled a small notebook from his pocket and clicked a pen. He licked the tip before scribbling experimentally on the pad and clearing his throat.. “Alright, first question...it’s an easy one,” he assured soothingly. He readied his pen and sniffed before hurling the notebook at the changeling’s face and seizing the bug by the shoulders and shaking him like a rat. “GIVE ME BACK MY FUCKING CHIP, YOU LITTLE TURD!”

The changeling shrieked and chattered in his restraints clearly confused and terrified beyond measure.

Celestia groaned and rubbed her eyes with a hoof. “*Well that went south fast...*” she muttered to herself. “I’m going to go break it up.”

“Um..Princess is he talking about the plastic thing the changeling swallowed?” the doctor spoke up over the ruckus in the other room.

“Yes. It’s apparently extremely important to the human...As you may have been able to tell...” she looked back through the window.

“*SPIT IT OUT RIGHT NOW!*” the human’s voice carried over the intercom.

Celestia groaned. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment...”

The stallion levitated a small plastic baggy containing a small black chip. “Princess, he coughed it up a few hours ago while being prepped for surgery.”

Celestia blinked a few times in rapid succession.

~~~~~

YOU’RE MAKING ME DO THIS!” The human threw the pillow case over the changeling’s head while it thrashed and shrieked in its restraints. “IT DIDN’T HAVE TO GO DOWN THIS WAY!” The human hefted the jug of water, popping the cap off with his thumb letting it clatter to the floor.

The door to the room slammed open as Celestia barreled inside. “SHANE STOP!” she shouted.

The human groaned in annoyance. “I’m kinda *in the middle of something* right now...” he said through his teeth as he turned to the alicorn annoyedly.

Celestia held up the chip aloft in her magic.

The human’s mouth formed a small “O” as he processed what his eyes were telling him. He glanced back and forth between the changeling and the chip a few times.

He reached over and deftly lifted the pillow case from the changeling’s face. “...you don’t have the chip anymore...” It was more of a statement than a question, but the changeling shook his head vigorously anyway. The human chewed the inside of his cheek. “I see...Well. I *suppose* there may have been a *slight* miscommunication on our part. I apologize for that...” he admitted calmly before his eyes once again narrowed. “...Anyway...” he growled and pulled the pillow case back down over the changeling’s



head and hefted the water jug as the bug continued its shrieking.

“SHANE!” Celestia shouted.

“What?!”

“I SAID *STOP!*”

The human’s shoulders slumped. “...*But I already got the water...*” he whined shaking the jug disappointedly.

Celestia glared at the biped.

“Fine!” the human snatched the pillowcase off the changeling’s head, before retreating toward the alicorn. He plucked the baggy from Celestia’s magic before twisting back around and pointing at the changeling. “You better *pray* this still fucking works! Because if it doesn’t I’m coming back!”

The changeling chittered a few words in rapid succession.

Shane frowned. “What did he say?” he asked, his eyes never leaving the changeling’s.

The unicorn stallion jolted at the question. “I didn’t quite catch all of it...” he admitted. “But it...*sounded* like he was apologizing.”

“What?” the human turned to the doctor with a skeptic eye.

“He said, ‘*I’m sorry,*’ and then something about wanting to go home.”

The human snorted and looked back at the changeling who was staring at him intently. The human muttered something behind his teeth.

The changeling’s irisless blue eyes were pleading.

Shane’s frown deepened. He turned away from the bug and stepped past the two ponies, silently passing without a second word.

~~~~~

Luna glided gracefully down the corridor of the dungeon, eager to join her sister. She was hungry for information. Hopefully Celestia and the human were faring better with the changeling, than she was with the nobles of Canterlot, who were all in an absolute frenzy after Celestia had dropped the news of extraterrestrial life in their laps. Needless to say, the initial press conference had gone...*less than favorably*. It, of course, could have gone much *much* worse. She reminded herself not to curse their scant luck with her complaints.

She nearly yelped as she rounded a corner only to have the human shout and bowl over top of her, sending the surprised biped crashing to the ground as she lay sprawled out on the floor.

The human groaned painfully as he rolled himself back onto his feet.

“Major?!” she blurted from her place on the floor.

Shane brushed himself off, before hooking his hands under her barrel. “What are- Hey!” she squirmed as she was lifted and placed gently back on her hooves, like she was a potted plant he had inadvertently tipped. The human swept some dust from the alicorn’s coat with a quick brush of the hand, he even bothered to smooth a few of her wayward feathers back into place. The princess went faintly scarlet in the ears at the attention. He stood and sniffed as he appraised the alicorn, while she stammered to find some words. Before she could think of anything appropriately witty to say he turned and continued on his way.

Luna collected herself. “Wait! Where are you going?!”

The human fished a small plastic baggy out of his pocket, shaking it over his head as he hurriedly retreated back toward his room.

“Is that the chip? What happened to the changeling?! Wait a minute!” she called back irritated at being ignored.

He didn’t answer as he rounded a corner out of sight.

The alicorn huffed before plodding after him.

She arrived at the entrance to the his cell. The man was frantically

throwing things around his room as he rummaged through his bags.  
“Major?”

The human grunted in response.

“What happened to the changeling?”

“Nothing yet.” he answered icily.

“You have your trinket though?” she asked curiously.

The human sighed. “Yeah...I have my trinket.” He dug out the small tablet computer from his bag and sat on his cot anxiously.

“Pray, tell. What is its significance?” she asked as she nosed over to where the human sat. “You seemed fairly...*upset*...when it was taken.

“You could say that,” he muttered.

“What purpose does it serve?”

The human hesitated, “Don’t take it the wrong way, but I kinda doubt you’d really understand.” The human scratched the side of his nose. “It’s kinda like a storage device. You can put encrypted information on it and use special machines to extract and interpret it.”

Luna’s brow furrowed. “What possible use could the changelings have for something like that?” She wondered out loud. “I have no doubt this information is valuable, but...even if it had succeeded in stealing it they would have no way of accessing it.”

“We’re gonna have to figure that out later,” he mused still tapping away on the illuminated screen. “I was a bit more concerned with *us losing it* than *him having it* if you know what I mean. If he fried this thing though...” the human shook his head.

“What information is on the chip?” she asked.

The human made a noncommittal noise as he attempted to formulate an answer. “It had *a lot* of things on it. I guess to keep it

simple, think of it like a key. A very special key that gives you the means to access a lot of important stuff,” he began. “Plans, crypto, locations, codes, coordinates, shit we would rather keep private if you know what I’m saying.”

“It would seem prudent to be secretive about such things,” she agreed.

“There are very special codes and algorithms in place that encrypt this information and files which make our technology virtually unusable to anyone that doesn’t know how to use this special key.” he waved a hand around. “It’s all a lot more complicated than that but do you understand what I’m getting at?”

“I believe so,” she nodded with some hesitation.

“*Luna*,” The human became uncharacteristically serious. “...Until today I was a little hesitant to come out and say it but *something* was answering my signal...” he nodded to himself. “Whoever or whatever that is, is my ticket off this rock. I can *feel* it.” He asserted passionately, before catching himself. He held a hand up disarmingly, “No offense or anything, mind you,” he added hastily. “But I would love to get the hell off this fucking planet with a quickness if at all possible. Again no offense.”

Luna smiled slightly and shrugged a wing, “None taken.”

Shane continued. “Well for all intents and purposes just understand that *this*,” he held up the chip “...is the lynchpin that solves the mystery signal,” he said simply. “If there is a chance at ever discovering the source of that mystery signal...If there was ever even a *chance* of getting home? This little thing is what shows me the way.”

Luna nodded as she spun in a small circle before curling up on the soft padded floor of the cell. “I am very proud of you, Shane,” she announced with a contented smile.

The sudden shift in tone and subject cause the human to stop and fix the the Alicorn with a bewildered smirk. “...Thanks?”

"You are welcome," she replied. "We think you are making considerable progress in accepting our friendship. You speak of many things that sound like jealously guarded secrets. We thank you for confiding in us." she noted with a playfully raised eyebrow.

"You guys have a really weird and poorly defined obsession with *friendship*," The human offered a halfhearted scoff as he went back to work. "Maybe I'm just running out of things to hide from you people."

"Would it not be safe to assume this conversation with a foreign leader would be somewhat frowned upon by your standard operating procedures?" she grinned.

He smiled as he typed. "You know the thing about standard operating procedures..." he glanced at the alicorn. "...**they're, standard.**" He turned his attention back to his device. "And I think it's fair to say our situation is anything but." He rubbed the side of his nose again and sniffed. "So needless to say, I've been deviating from *a lot* of standard operating procedures lately...Like *A LOT*. I didn't even shave today," he announced in a hushed tone.

Luna hummed. "You fiend."

"Yeah well, seeing as I am essentially acting as my own chain of command, I find myself becoming less and less observant of protocols as my situation becomes less... *hopeful*," he euphemized. "In all honesty by this point if you had walked in the door and asked if wanted to go do a fat rail of coke in the bathroom with you, I'd...probably have to really think about it for a second."

Luna laughed despite not fully understanding. His meaning was clear enough, that the bleakness of his situation could drive him to do things he normally would not. She if anypony could relate to the notion of bad circumstances leading to...questionable decisions.

She watched him type carefully on the tablet device for several silent moments. "Showtime..." He muttered quietly.

The tablet beeped suddenly. His smile disappeared. He only blinked at the screen.

“Major?” he gave no indication of having heard the alicorn as he worked his jaw back and forth contemplatively.

“Shane?” she tried again more sternly. His eyes shot toward the alicorn as if woken from a dream. “Is everything alright?”

He pulled the chip from its port before rubbing the connectors against the fabric of his pants. “Yeah,” he nodded, slipping a smile back on his face. “It’s fine,” he reassured nodding again.

Luna watched without comment while her heart sank lower and lower. The human stuck the chip back into its port, the device beeping almost immediately. The human’s eye twitched, eyes darting to the alicorn for only a fraction of a second as if embarrassed. His jaw clenched and his smile became more obviously forced. He pulled the chip from its port, rubbing it against his trouser legs more aggressively.

“Major?” she nosed quietly.

“They just get dirty sometimes. It’s gonna work,” he replied immediately, traces of desperation creeping into his voice.

Luna shrank back, as he re-inserted the chip. The tablet rejected the small black chip once more with an indignant beep. Shane began to tap his foot frantically as he chewed on his cheek. “Come on.” he murmured, tapping the screen a few times. “...don’t do this.” he begged. Yanking the chip and reinserting it. The screen beeped and flashed red.

The human gripped the tablet so fiercely the alicorn feared it might snap in two. His forced smile was now gone.

Luna held her breath. She wasn’t sure why. She watched the humans anxious face as harsh light from the device in his lap cast his face in light that gave him a gaunt, haunted appearance. “*Come on...*” he whispered. The light flashed red as his hands gripped the device so hard they shook.

Luna rose to her hooves, slowly making her way over to the distressed human.

His jaw clenched and he tore the chip from its port once again, he breathed on the gold connecting ports before rubbing them on his shirt. He jammed the delicate chip back into its port. The screen flashed red.

*"Fuck..."* he spat quietly. The human stood and threw the tablet against his cot. He rubbed his palm against the back of his head habitually as he paced back and forth.

"Major?" Luna began tentatively.

He ceased his pacing and rested a hand on his hip "It's fucked..." he said quietly, not bothering to look the alicorn in the eye.

Luna spoke carefully. "...is there no repairing it?"

He was quiet for a moment before shrugging helplessly and shaking his head. "No."

Luna swore internally, but did her best to keep her face neutral. It was a costly loss. The source of the mysterious signal might never be revealed. And in turn the human's signal would never be heard. "...and your home?"

The human fixed his jaw and shook his head, still refusing to meet the princesses gaze.

"Shane-"

His face twisted as he spun around and kicked his cot, his steel toed boot denting the aluminum bar and sending the tablet and all his belongings flying across the room. "FUUUUUUCK!!!" He reached down and grabbed the, now bent, cot and threw it against the far wall of the cell where it clattered to a heap on the floor. "WILL YOU JUST GIVE ME A FUCKING BREAK?!" He screamed at the ceiling.

Luna bit her lip and said nothing as she waved off the guards that leapt into the room at the commotion.

He stood for several seconds breathing heavily and shaking letting the remnants of rage boil off. He turned and leaned forward, resting

his forehead against the padded surface of the wall and folding his fingers behind his head and took several deep measured breaths.

He turned around and scratched his nose. Before letting his hands fall to his sides as he slid down until his rear met the padded floor.

He just sat there and tried to be still, breathing in and out. His eyes were miserable, but he snorted as a slap-happy smile was stapled to his face. “embarrassing...” he said quietly.

“What is?” Luna dared asked.

“Why I’m so upset about this,” he laughed. “...*seriously*, it’s not like it’s a surprise. Shit, even if it WAS working it’s not like anyone would come.” he shook his head. “It was stupid to even get my hopes up.”

“It is never stupid to hope, Major.” the alicorn offered quietly.

The human’s face contorted as he looked at the floor between his legs. “Just kinda had this idea in the back of my head that I’d figure out a way, ya know?” he cleared his throat. He ran his fingers through his short brown hair as he fought off the resurgence of despair. Luna swallowed as she plodded closer to the forlorn creature.

She rested a hoof gently against his knee. The human wasn’t one for sentiment or pity, she was certain enough of that. She would do her best to comfort the alien. “All will be well, Major,” she began softly. “...we shall think of something.”

The human sighed and rubbed his head painfully. “I just... kinda wish something would break in our favor for once... Just to shake things up. I’m getting real fucking sick of one step forward three steps back,” he complained.

“Would, mayhaps, *a hug* make you feel better?” she smiled.

“I really doubt it would...” he answered plainly.

“We shall try anyway...” she informed as she stepped in between his legs.



*"I don't want a hug."*

"Yes you do," she assured, and rested her chin on top of his head and draped her wings around him. Humans were built differently from ponies, and from their awkward position she couldn't quite give him a proper hug. Despite the fact that they were both fairly well known for being less than affectionate individuals. She hoped that her attempt would be adequate. "Hmmm There it is... Pleasant, is it not?" she added happily, giving her wings a squeeze.

He didn't recoil or push her away like she feared, but he also didn't seem to reciprocate the gesture in any way that Luna could tell. She began to wonder if she had made a mistake, when she felt the human sigh and lean his head against her chest.

He buried himself in Luna's fur and hid from the world for several moments. "I'm tired... I just wanna go home..." he finally croaked.

Luna found it unusually hard to swallow for a moment. She wrapped a foreleg around the human's shoulders and pulled him against her. "We know..." she whispered. There wasn't much else she could think to say. So she said nothing, occasionally squeezing her wings or nuzzling the human's hair.

She was never this close to him for any length of time. He smelled like smoke and brass. Luna retracted her hoof from around his shoulders, but didn't otherwise move. She prodded his head with her nose. "...Wouldst thou like to do a fat rail of coke in the bathroom with us?" she offered with a hopeful grin.

The human snorted, unable to keep the laugh down. He pulled his head back revealing a half smile breaking through his miserable face. His laughter was slaphappy and broken but seemed to blossom and grow the more he reflected on it. Luna began to chuckle along with him.

"I get the feeling you might not really understand what you're asking for."

"Nay. We do not," she admitted. "It sounds unsanitary."

“Well...” he added, “that’s one way of putting it.” There was a small silence as the human sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I don’t know I’m supposed to do, Luna” he admitted plainly yet hopelessly.

Luna pondered the question. “Whatever you wish, I suppose,” she replied, not overly fond of her own answer.

“Me and wishes don’t exactly have a stellar track record.”

“You are in an unpleasant situation, human,” she admitted. “You are faced with the loss of everything you know, trapped on a world that is not your own-”

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly as he hummed, “I especially love how you aren’t even trying to sugarcoat it or anything...”

“Sugar would do little to improve your plight, Major.” Luna backed away from the man. She sat on her haunches tall and regal as an alicorn princess could be. “You neither want nor need pretty words. I think perhaps it is time you begin to entertain the idea that you ARE stuck here, and likely shall be forever.” she affirmed.

“Have I not been?” he asked seeming somewhat put off.

She cast a brief glance about his person. “Nay... We do not think so,” she answered calmly. “We believe until now you have deluded yourself into believing you are temporarily stranded. And have done little to prepare yourself mentally for an extended stay on this planet.” She shifted her wings into a more comfortable position. “I hope you do not mistake my bluntness for cruelty, but I believe you have given it very little thought at all. I think that you have avoided openly addressing the matter because you find that doing so leads your mind to a very dark place. And I fear that the longer you dwell there, the more comforting such ideas may seem.”

The human’s face was perfectly passive under the alicorn’s gaze. To the ancient princess, the practiced lack of reaction said just as much as any refutation.

“It is not pleasant for me to say, human. But times are not so kind, and circuitry would only serve us ill. You have been thrust into a

role you did not want, and for which you were not trained. And you will have to live with the weight of your burdens in this world, striving to regain some lost semblance of meaning and purpose until the day you die.” Her words were final, resolute, and fell like hammer blows. “Ponies have been driven to madness or worse by far less. I suppose the question that you need to ask yourself is...Will you carry on? Or will *this* be the thing that breaks you?”

The human was still as he looked at up the alicorn. He eyeballed the princess strangely, as if she had just given him a riddle to be solved. Luna raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. After a moment she shrugged. She stood and straightened her wings. She inspected herself briefly before turning back to Shane with a nearly apologetic look in her eyes. “I am sorry, Major. For what it’s worth,” she said finally. Luna turned toward the door. She looked back at the man on the floor. He was staring blankly at the opposite wall. “Take your time to reflect. If you need it. Decide what your place is to be in all this. But right now I have a duty to my kingdom and to my ponies. I must join my sister.” The dark princess took a step outside before stopping one last time. “Major?” The human swiveled his head toward the alicorn. “Whatever it is you decide... there *are* still those that need you. Remember that.”

Shane blinked at the princess, offering nothing more. She turned and left the cell, pausing only to relieve the two door guards of their post.

~~~~~

Celestia cocked an eyebrow at her sister as the lunar princess entered the dark room.

“The human’s device is destroyed.” Luna stated simply, preemptively answering Celestia’s question.

Celestia cursed quietly and took a deep breath. “And the source of the signal?” She turned back toward the large one-way pane of glass through which the changeling sat, still cuffed to the hospital bed. The doctor fussed over the pony-esque insectoid creature.

“It originates from somewhere in Whitetail wood...” she began.

“But without the chip we now have no way of finding out where exactly. The human had some theories but none very concrete. And now...”

“Now we’re flying blind,” Celestia finished.

“In a sense, yes.” Luna confirmed, coming to a stop beside her elder sister.

“Perfect,” she replied bitterly. “Our luck does seem to have soured on us, doesn’t it?”

“Mmm,” Luna hummed in agreement.

“Is he upset?”

“He isn’t happy,” she answered simply. “From what we understand the chip’s ability to detect our mystery signal was also the thing that allowed him to send his distress call.”

Celestia’s wings drooped slightly. “I see...” she muttered. “No wonder he was desperate. The changeling stole his only chance at rescue. How’s he doing?”

Luna was somewhat hesitant to answer. “We shall see. I gave him something to think about.”

Celestia nodded not bothering to ask what her sister meant. If Luna felt it necessary to tell her what transpired between them she would. For now Celestia was content to let the matter rest.

“Has the changeling said anything yet?”

“Plenty,” Celestia said, somewhat brightly. “He seems to be under the impression that if he doesn’t cooperate we’ll turn him over to the aliens.”

Luna sniffed with slight amusement. “Did you tell him that?”

“Of course not,” Celestia assured. “But I certainly didn’t correct him.”

Luna ts'k'd disapprovingly but grinned regardless. "What has he said?"

"He's a deserter," she began. "Chrysalis' swarm. Said he couldn't or didn't want to fight in the invasion. I'm not sure which. Probably been bouncing around town to town since the attack. His hive would have banished him or worse for his cowardice. He must have heard about the human and infiltrated the castle. He had a distressingly accurate understanding of the situation," she added sourly.

"They are born and bred to be perfect spies, sister. I wouldn't let it trouble you overly so," Luna comforted.

"He seems to think that if he brought back sufficient information he could buy his way back into the hive. He knew the chip was important but he clearly doesn't know or really care why."

"His ticket home was the human's ticket home..." the Lunar alicorn scoffed without even a trace of mirth. "And now neither of them get it." Luna rubbed her eyes tiredly. "Cruel though it may be, I suppose I can't say fate isn't without a sense of irony."

"I suppose so," Celestia agreed quietly.

"What do you think we should do with him?" Luna asked.

"He seems compliant enough, he has nowhere to go. He's a pariah. Even if we were to release him he would likely die of starvation or worse. With his injuries he won't be able to maintain disguises for any length of time. He'll never fly again with only one wing. The doctor says he'll probably be able to walk normally again once he heals but even then only after months of painful physical therapy," Celestia droned on before changing her inflection. "But..." Luna's ears perked at her tone. "Call me crazy but I think he might still be useful."

The doctor opened the door and stepped through making sure to shut and secure it behind him. He noticed Luna's arrival, pausing to greet his diarch.

“How is our guest, doctor?” Luna asked.

“Frightened, but unharmed,” he assured. “Well...he hasn’t been harmed *further*.”

The stallion’s pupils shrank as his eyes ventured beyond the princess, toward the door.

The alicorn’s followed his gaze and found the human standing in the doorway wearing a perfectly neutral expression. Celestia cast a brief sideways glance at Luna who was matching the Marine’s expression with a stoney face of her own.

Shane stepped into the room, having discarded his blouse he was now clad in his skivvy shirt and trousers which were bloused smartly above his boots. Celestia eyed the heavy black forty-five strapped to his thigh. Not failing to notice the retainer strap was undone.

The human stepped up to the glass. Luna’s watched him as he stared at the bedded changeling with an uncomfortably emotionless expression. “Have you made your peace, Shane?” Luna asked directly.

“Not really,” he answered plainly. “...I’m really beginning to think I don’t have the capacity for it.”

“You’ll ...stay with us then?” she continued sounding somewhat diffident.

“You thought I wouldn’t?” he cast a sideways glance at the alicorn.

“It’s not that,” she clarified. “I merely have difficulties predicting your...long term intentions.”

“What little I had in the way of long term intentions were pretty ruined when your little friend decided to soak my transmitter chip in stomach acid,” he nodded toward the window. “I suddenly found myself forced to reevaluate my position in this story.”

“And where in your reevaluation did you find yourself?”

Shane took a deep breath. “I’m right where I’m standing, Luna.” He turned his attention back toward the changeling. “I’m not anywhere else.”

Neither alicorn really knew what to say, if anything.

“What’s he said?” Shane finally asked breaking the silence.

Celestia stepped forward, repeating the story she had told Luna, happy for the return of conversation. Although Shane didn’t seem to really be paying much attention, barely giving a nod and a hum when she finished. He asked some additional questions about changelings in general. Seeming more interested in what Celestia’s descriptions of their prowess and abilities.

Celestia glossed over the general ideas, he clearly didn’t quite understand what she meant while explaining their dietary habits. The changeling was an infiltrator, a spy, a saboteur, and assassin. He was an operative of Queen Chrysalis, an all but defunct Changeling monarch in the badlands. A remnant of a failed invasion. However his refusal to fight during the attack branded him a coward. He was an outcast from his hive, dishonored and never to return.

She didn’t make the obvious analogy. She felt it might be in poor taste. If nothing else the ice cold stare the human leveled at the insect-ish creature on the other side of the mirrored portal was sufficient to dissuade her.

“What will you do with him?” he asked still uncomfortably devoid of emotion.

“Well...” she began with her careful words. “I was thinking of offering him a job.”

~~~~~

Twilight took a deep breath as she finally finished regaling the Princess of Love the fully updated happening of the extra terrestrial visitor. Cadance found herself releasing her own pent up breath.

“....wow,” the pink alicorn said finally.

“...yeah,” Twilight agreed. “Wow.”

“A changeling?!” Cadance asked once more. “How did it get into the castle, much less on Celestia’s carriage?”

“I don’t know,” Twilight admitted. “Celestia and Luna should be with it now, hopefully with some answers.”

“And your...*friend*?” she asked hesitantly.

Twilight blew a strand of mane away from her face. “He *should* be with them. I dropped him off at the dungeons about an hour or two ago. But he does have an irritating habit of wandering off.”

The alicorn nodded understandingly. This *human* was starting to sound more like a rambunctious child than a fearsome space-faring creature. Maybe it was just all the years she spent as a babysitter talking. “Part of me still doesn’t really believe it, you know?” Cadance began, dropping to an excited whisper. “I mean...real life *aliens*?! It’s like something out of a fantasy book!”

Twilight laughed at the alicorn’s enthusiasm, and rubbed the side of her head with her hoof. “Well, it hasn’t exactly been storybook material,” she confessed.

“I can tell,” Cadance scoffed, “You could cut the tension in this castle with a knife...”

An armored thestral stepped into the room, seeing the mares gathered there before hurrying over. The sentinel gave a hasty bow to the Princess of the Crystal Empire before addressing them. “Your, highness. Welcome to Equestria. It is an honor to have you back in the castle. I apologize there was no one of higher repute to greet you properly. We’ve had a bit of an emergency this morning.”

Cadance smiled at the guard, comfortably slipping back into her royal demeanor. “I’ve been informed of the situation. Please don’t let it trouble you. I understand completely,” she winked surreptitiously at Twilight. “Might you know where my husband ran off to?”

“Captain Armor was just summoned by the princesses to the



dungeons. My orders are to escort you and Miss Sparkle there as well, if you would allow me, your highness. The other Elements of Harmony are, of course welcome to join us if they please,” he added lowering his head toward Rarity and Pinkie Pie. “But if I may be so bold, time is not on our side, it would be prudent for us to make haste.”

“Do we have time to make a quick stop first?” she asked.

The sentinel shifted uncomfortably but nodded. “Of course your highness. The summons is, of course, at your convenience. I shall escort you wherever you may need until you are ready.”

“Thank you. It should only take a moment.” the alicorn assured.

The guard lowered his head once more. “Yes, your highness.”

“Whoo Hoo! Catharsis time!” Pinkie exclaimed before bouncing out the door like a rocket.

~~~~~

“I didn’t say it was a ‘bad’ idea I said it was a stupid idea.” Shane blew smoke from his nose and stretched his back in the sunshine outside the dungeon.

“What pray tell is the difference?” Celestia asked incredulously.

“A good idea can still be stupid and a bad idea can be smart. For example. Using a captured enemy to gain information is a good idea,” he nodded. “Giving him a job, and further yet, a job that gives him ample opportunities to escape and fuck us over even harder is a monumentally fucking stupid idea.”

Celestia answered him. “You are thinking about this too emotionally. Changelings are incredibly adaptable and versatile creatures. Information gathering, emotional monitoring, espionage. The more I think about it the more I find reasons to try. If we can earn his trust and put him to work for us, he could prove an invaluable asset to our efforts.”

“I have no doubt,” Shane agreed. “But to what level of risk? All of

these reasons, while assuredly useful, are equally as likely to blow up in our faces as they are to help us. I'm tempted to go back in there and cap his ass just to keep you from "considering" it any further." He jabbed a finger back at the building. "If he manages to fuck off back to wherever the hell he came from and spill the beans about our operation, it's your ass... ***Correction, it's our asses,***" he revised. "He knows too much."

"He knows nothing more than what we are about to reveal to the world in a few hours time. The conference is TODAY, Shane" she reminded. "Leaders from all over the country, and several others, will be arriving in the city to hear my official announcement of your presence. And besides that, what he '*knows*' he doesn't understand. Your technologies are as incomprehensible to us as our magic is to you. Nothing he can say can do any more harm at this point. And even if it could who would believe the word of an exiled changeling deserter?"

Shane chewed on the inside of his cheek, hating the turn the conversation had taken.

"And before you protest further, nothing has even been decided yet. I am merely saying that it is an avenue that I think we should give some thought to. It will be weeks or months until the poor creature can even walk properly again. We have plenty of time to interrogate, interview, and evaluate him before he would even be capable of operating."

Shane harrumphed and dropped the cigarette butt on the ground. "Fine. We can table the issue *for now*. But I think it's a mistake."

Celestia looked at the progress of the sun. Not that she needed to. She knew exactly what time it was. And they had precious little available to prepare for the summit. "Luna didn't have much time to brief me on your findings this morning. Did you learn anything useful?"

Shane shook his head. "Nothing that makes any sense to me at least. We know it's coming from somewhere West-ish of here. We came up with a very rough grid. Somewhere within a couple square miles of forest land called *Whitetail Wood*."

Celestia hummed. Luna had told her essentially the same thing. “Did you learn anything else?”

Shane sighed. “Like I said, nothing useful. And what IS useful just raises more questions.” He lit another cigarette. “I think it’s response time is automated. Meaning it’s not just interference or random static. Something is deliberately answering my pings.”

“Something?” she asked

“It’s gotta be a machine. An automatic robotic response of some kind. Unless there’s like...a magical breed of squirrel on this planet that communicates via radio waves.” He took a drag on his cigarette before turning to Celestia. “There *isn’t*, is there?”

Celestia smiled. “Not that I am aware of.”

She could have sworn she saw disappointment in his face for a moment. “Well, either way we won’t know for sure until we get there.”

Celestia paused. “Get where?”

“The source. We *have* to know what’s sending it. For both our sakes. And I guess I’m just gonna have to go walk around the woods until we find it.” He must have seen the look on the alicorn’s face. “Look without that chip we don’t have much of a choice. We gotta get some boots on the ground or we’ll just be sitting here waiting to see who visits who first.”

“I understand but the political climate might not exactly be favorable enough for us to have you exploring the countryside while world leaders sit here very eagerly waiting to speak with you.”

“Well they waited a couple millennia to find out if aliens existed, they can wait an extra couple days to talk with one. I don’t see much of an alternative.”

“We send a detachment of guards to cordon off the area and conduct a search.” Shane rolled his eyes. Celestia bristled, “They are **more** than capable of-”

Shane snorted. "Of what? Poking stuff with their spears? They wouldn't even know what to look for."

"Well neither do you."

"I'd say I got a better chance of spotting it than some asshole who has *literally* never even seen a computer before. What are they gonna do if they find something? They don't even have fingers. Or worse yet what are they gonna do if they find someONE. What if it's human? What if they're hostile? Whatever is sending that signal is smart, advanced, and if it ain't human, it's something else. And if it's not as nice as me the only thing you'd be sending those guards to do would be die. So whether you like it or not I'm the only one who could potentially have a chance of identifying and operating it, and if it's something hostile then I am still the meanest son-of-a-bitch you got."

Celestia resisted the urge to grind her teeth. "Fine. We may be able to stall for time but we can not wait forever. I'll give you two days on site to find something and if you don't, then you're turning the search over to somepony else and coming right back," she demanded.

"I'll need at least five days to thoroughly cover that much territory."

"You won't be alone, you'll have enough personnel assisting you to conduct a proper search. *Two days.*"

"Gimme at least three to make sure it get done right."

Celestia snorted and frowned. "Three days and not a second more. You're lucky you get anything. If I had my way you wouldn't be going at all."

"Fine," he relented. "But I want control of the operation. And I'll need to brief anyone who's going to be on site."

"Very well."

"Briefed on whaaat?" Pinkie Pie asked as she pranced toward the pair. "Hi, Princess!"

Celestia smiled at the young mare. "Hello my little pony."

"What are you guys talkin' about, hmm?" she asked, nudging the human's leg with her muzzle.

Shane smiled, sinking his fingers into the insistent mare's mane, scratching her ears and neck, much to her delight. "Don't worry about it. It's grown-up stuff."

Celestia blinked involuntarily. Did Shane think Pinkie Pie was a child? Should she tell him Pinkie was an adult? Granted the mare was somewhat...*immature* at times but still. It may have also explained why Shane tolerated her antics. Had Shane ever seen an actual Equestrian foal? She couldn't think of a time where he would have. And Pinkie Pie was on the smaller side for her age.

Pinkie swatted at the human. "I am a grown-up!" She asserted, puffing her cheeks indignantly.

"Awww," Shane cooed. "Okay, Miss grown-up. If you must know, I have to go outta town for a bit to look for something."

"You're leaving!? When? For how long?" she demanded suddenly very alarmed.

"Tomorrow, and just a few days. Don't worry about it. I'll be back before you realize I'm gone."

"Where are you going?"

"Whitetail Woods," he replied.

Pinkie cocked her head slightly, appearing confused. She narrowed her eyes smiling slowly as if she caught someone doing something embarrassing. "You're not gonna find anything there, silly."

It was Shane's turn to look confused. "What? "

"If there was something there I would know," she promised.

Shane grinned nodded exaggeratedly. "Well, not that I don't believe you, but unfortunately I am a very curious individual and I'm afraid

I need to see for myself.”

Pinkie shrugged. “Curiosity killed the cat,” she sang as she bounced around the human.

“Did satisfaction bring it back?” he added.

“Nope!” she pounced up onto the human’s back. She hooked her hooves over his shoulders to keep her balance.

“....uh...aaaalright then.” Shane’s smile suddenly became forced and Celestia felt a very mortal chill run down her spine. Something about the way the mare so matter-of-factly said it made her very uncomfortable.

“Shane, Princess!” Twilight greeted happily.

The trio turned to see Twilight approaching with Rarity and *yet another* alicorn, this one was a gentle pink with soft purple highlights in her feathers. Her long hair was a warm luxurious affair of pink, purple, and yellow. A blue heart-shaped crystal adorned her rear. She was a bit taller than Twilight but still considerably smaller than Shane or Celestia.

Her horn glowed with shimmering blue magic as she deposited a large ornate chest on the ground. She trotted toward them to make proper introductions. The thestral that accompanied her bowed to Celestia.

“Your Highness, Major Doran, if I may present Princess Mi Amore Cadenza.”

“Thank you, Corporal.” Cadance said to the thestral who once more lowered his head to the alicorn.

Cadance pranced over to Celestia. “Hello, Auntie!”

Celestia hummed happily, before reaching down and nuzzling the pink alicorn affectionately. “Hello, my dear. I do apologize for the sudden summoning. I hope your trip wasn’t too taxing.”

Shane’s face soured with apparent surprise. He turned to Twilight

and mouthed “*Auntie?*” clearly confused by the alicorn’s relationship.

Twilight smirked, and mouthed, “*I’ll explain later.*”

“Not at all, it’s good to be back home,” Cadance dismissed.

Rarity trotted over toward the human, barely keeping the irritation off her face.

“Rarity,” Shane greeted pleasantly.

“Hello, darling. Lovely to see you as always.” She turned her attention to the earth pony on his shoulders. “Pinkie!” she said in a hushed shout. “Get down from there, immediately. This is not how you act among royalty. Major Doran is not a jungle-gym!” Pinkie groaned and rolled her eyes as she untangled her hooves from around the human’s neck.

Celestia turned her attention to Shane who was waiting patiently as his bubbly pink parasite leapt down from his back. “Major, Doran. This is my niece. Princess Cadance. Empress of the Crystal Empire. And Captain Armor’s wife.”

Cadance flared her wings and crossed her legs as she initiated what ponies must consider a curtsy. “It is an honor to finally meet you, Major. I must say these are exciting times indeed. I look forward to working with you in the future. I am sure there is much we can learn from each other.”

Shane smiled nodded his head at the alicorn, which was the closest thing the human seemed to be willing to get to a proper bow. “Apparently the honor is mine, Princess. Although ‘exciting’ may be a bit grandiose a term for what’s been happening recently, I’m afraid.”

Cadance’s smile fell somewhat. “Yes...I was informed of the situation. You have my condolences, Major. It would seem fate has laid a heavy price upon your shoulders”

Shane rolled his shoulders, eyeing the pink mare next to him. Clearly weighing the option of making a joke about the situation.

But apparently deciding against it. “Thank you. The sentiment is... appreciated.”

Cadance nodded brightening somewhat. “Well needless to say you shall have the full support and protection of the Crystal Empire, and would be a welcomed guest should you find it convenient to visit us up north.”

“That’s very generous, thank you. You are very kind. Your taste in significant-others, notwithstanding,” he jabbed playfully.

Cadance chuckled good-heartedly. “Yes I understand your first meeting with my husband was somewhat less than smooth. Shiny can be a bit stubborn at times, but I can assure you he a good stallion and he always means well.”

Shane hummed an amused noncommittal response.

“In fact. I’ve brought a gift. A peace offering, if you will. Consider it a sign of good will from the crystal ponies. Her horn sparked alight as she levitated the ornate wooden chest over from its place on the grass. “A little bird told me about some of your...recreational appetites. I thought you might enjoy these.”

Shane’s curiosity spiked as she set the box on the ground and pulled open the lid. Nearly two dozen, neatly etched and ornate glass bottles sat packed soft in padded slots. They were filled to the brim with a rich maroon liquid so pure and vibrant that seemed to give off its own light.

The human’s jaw fell open. Cadance lifted one of the bottles from its padded slot and presented it to the human who took it with reverent hands. “Crystal Brandy. One of the finest spirits in the world, if I do say so myself. The berries used to make it only grow once every two years in one very specific region of the Crystal Empire. And it is quite tasty in my humble opinion.” She beamed proudly, as she turned to try and gauge the human’s reaction.

Shane gingerly set the bottle back in its respective felt box. He took a few weighty steps toward the pink alicorn of love as he sat on his heels in front of her.



She did her best to maintain her smile despite the human drilling his eyes into hers with a stone masked expression. He reached out with both hands resting them gently on her shoulders. She was proud to say she didn't flinch. She did however let out a squeak as Shane hooked his hands under her forelegs as he stood lifting her by her midsection as she was brought into a slow but bone-crushing hug by the massive creature. She smiled and giggled as she realized her apparent success despite her discomfort.

"Be proud Cadance," Celestia laughed. "I have yet to see him happy enough to initiate affection toward anypony. Treasure the moment. It happens infrequently."

"Like I said," she wheezed. "No pony I can't win over."

Twilight tilted her head. "Shane are you crying?"

"No!" he choked and sniffled before burying his face back into the alicorn's mane.

~~~~~

Celestia ushered Shane and Cadance through a set of double doors that led to the backstage area of the auditorium where Luna was currently attempting to field questions and concerns from various Equestrian diplomats and foreign dignitaries. From the sound of angry frightened shouting, it was not going particularly well. Rarity and Pinkie Pie filed through the doors shortly after.

Shane walked over to a side table, un-slinging his massive twelve-gauge and setting the weapon on the table with a heavy thud. He rolled his shoulders before sidling over toward where Cadance and Rarity were watching the dark alicorn from the safety of the side stage.

The auditorium was almost large enough to be confused with an opera house. Row after row of seats were packed with ponies from all over Equestria. Several sections were roped off to make room for dignitaries and diplomats from nations across the globe. And every single one of them was shouting at the top of their lungs, trying to make their concerns heard over the others.

“Well...” Shane almost had to shout over the crowd. “This looks frustrating. I think I’ll owe little blue a drink after this.”

“I think she’ll need it,” Cadance agreed. The crowd was relentless. They seemed to be shouting at each other just as often as they were attempting to make their concerns heard to the alicorn on stage.

Shane retreated toward Twilight, he knelt down and said something Celestia couldn’t quite catch. Twilight pointed back toward the door they came in followed by a few more gestures. Shane ruffed up her mane as he retreated back outside.

“Where is he going?” Celestia asked suspiciously.

“Bathroom!” Twilight shouted back above the noise.

Celestia pursed her lips and took one wayward glance back toward the double doors the human had disappeared through.

Luna waited at the podium hoping desperately for a lull in the chaos to continue her sentence. She tapped her forehoof on the magical microphone impatiently. “Ladies and Gentlecolts, please be at ease, if you will merely-” the panicked shouting drowned out even the sound of the massive speakers. “If you would simply let me-” Luna groaned in frustration as she appeared to make no headway. “I will have order in the room!” she demanded sternly. “Please calm thyself and see that-” Only to be drowned out once more. Luna’s eyes glassed over with silver magic.

**“SILENCE!”** the alicorn screamed, deafening the first few rows by the stage. The lights flickered and dimmed as the alicorn brought her power back under control. The crowd had gone quiet as a cemetery on a moonless night. Luna cleared her throat. “Thank you. Now fillies and gentlecolts please know that I understand your fears. It is a world-changing event. And make no mistake it *will* change the world. And that is frightening, I understand. But I can assure you that this is not the extinction or invasion that you all seem to be assuming it is. The situation is well under control, these creatures have no desire to harm anyone, and in fact have-”

A massive minotaur lord interrupted the alicorn “Princess if there is

nothing to worry about, why was this kept secret for so long before alerting the rest of the world. What was there to hide?"

"There was nothing to hide," she asserted plainly. "To be quite frank we ourselves were not privy to the true scope of the situation until the alien regained consciousness and was able to eventually explain the nature of his presence directly." It was half of the truth, but it was the only half they would be receiving.

"Why would he wait to disclose such information?"

"His motives are his own, however I can only imagine he was testing the waters so to speak, the ensure we had no ill intentions before entrusting us with the truth."

"Forgive me, Princess, how can we be sure of any of this. Are we expected to believe that these extraterrestrial creatures sent just one being to our planet and they have no desire to send more. How do we know we aren't being cultivated for a larger invasion force?!"

The room filled with cries of agreement and a few dissenting minorities shouting counterarguments. Soon the entire room was once again at each other's throats with shouting and crying. Luna resisted the urge to slam her face against the podium.

A door in the back of the dim room cracked as someone slipped inside at the last minute. Luna's eye twitched a few times as she did her best not to let them bulge out of her head as the Shane slid into the room sidling into one of the very few empty seats in the last row, looking extremely amused.

Luna cast a sideways glance at her sister off stage. To the average person it would have looked like a totally innocent gesture. But to Celestia who had been with the lunar alicorn for thousands of years immediately noticed the subtle turmoil behind her baby sister's flickering eyes and the slight cocking of her head.

Celestia scanned the crowd and immediately saw the issue. Shane was sliding into one of the back rows toward an empty seat. Celestia ground her teeth together cursing herself for yet again trusting the human to be unsupervised for even the briefest of

moments. Although she had to admit she was somewhat surprised to see that for the most part nopony really seemed to notice or care about the human. Too focused were they on the alicorn on stage and shouting, no one bothered to question the strange looking biped who had arrived late to the meeting.

~~~~~

Shane plopped down in-between a pegasus mare and a pair of hulking minotaurs. “Hey is this the summit thing?” he asked the middle aged looking pegasus mare on his right.

“This is it,” she assured.

“What’d I miss?”

The mare turned to look at the human with disbelieving eyes. “Have you been living under a rock?”

“I’m not really from the area,” he frowned.

The mare looked him up and down. “Yeah I can tell. Where ARE you from? And uh... don’t take this the wrong way but uh...what are you exactly?”

“Oh, I’m a Marine. I’m from Kentucky.” He held out his hand.

“...nnneat.” She had no idea what those things were but didn’t want to look deliberately ignorant. “Well I’m Dandelion. But you can just call me Dee,” She shook his offered hand. “My boss sent me here to cover the story. I work at a news agency in Cloudsdale.” she explained. “So you haven’t heard anything yet?”

Shane shook his head. “I literally just wandered in here,”

“Apparently the Princesses made contact with alien life last week.”

“I know that much...” he clarified.

The mare nodded seriously. “Real life aliens though!”

“I know...trippy, man.” Shane noted smartly.

“You’re tellin’ me.” the mare agreed.

Shane wore a very pleased-with-himself smile. “I take it she hasn’t showed you what they look like yet?”

“There’s just one apparently. And no, I don’t know yet. As soon as Luna started talking everyone started bombarding her with questions. We haven’t seen very much yet in the ways of specifics.”

“How exciting,” he patted his hands against his lap. “What do you think about all this?”

“What do I think or what does the agency *want* me to think?”

“You,” Shane grinned.

She shrugged. “I’m not really sure. They say it crashed here by accident. Which I kinda believe.”

“Kinda?” he asked.

“If they did *CRASH* here by accident, fine I get that, but they have to have been coming here for something before they crashed. Like... they didn’t come here with the intention of crashing. I don’t know.”

The minotaur leaned over toward the two, “Do not let the Equestrians put any doubt into your mind, friend. The aliens are here to conquer. As the lords of old conquered the wildlands to carve out a place for their young, so too are these newcomers here to spread their hold onto newer planets.”

Shane hummed and nodded, in overacted contemplation.

“They are no different from you or I,” Luna reiterated, occasionally casting glances at the human in the crowd. “They have emotions, fears, desires. We are not facing a fleet of warships, we have made contact with a singular creature who was stranded here against his will by accident and has been thus far outstandingly cooperative. Nothing more and nothing less.”

Shane snorted and grinned.

One stallion raised his hoof and stood as Luna pointed at him. "Princess, we may be dealing with a singular creature now, but what happens if more show up? What countermeasures are being prepared for a larger force?"

"Talks are in place to prepare for the contingency. But I can assure you the prospect of a larger contact beyond the one survivor arriving is immeasurably small." Luna went on to explain exactly how small the odds were. Despite the figures and assurances, the mob appeared yet unconvinced.

Dandelion leaned over to her new acquaintance. "If I didn't know any better I'd say the princess is staring at us." the mare muttered under her breath.

Shane leaned over and frowned. "That's probably my fault," he admitted. "I'm supposed to be backstage with her sister. I told her I was going to the bathroom." The mare shot the biped a quizzical look. "Watch..." Shane waved at the alicorn animatedly. She narrowed her eyes at the human in a subtle glare. "Yeah she's mad," he confirmed.

"Wait... you *know* Princess Luna?" she backpedaled.

"Yeah."

"How?"

"I guess we're like... sorta friends. She pulled me from a spaceship crash a few weeks ago."

The mare worked her mouth and eyebrows for a few seconds before realization washed over her. Even the minotaur was staring at the human with his jaw hanging loosely on its hinges.

~~~~~

A frustrated Zebra in purple robes stood and shouted above the rest. "For what reason can this creature not speak for itself?! For how long are we to listen to the pledges and promises of the Equestrian crown, when the very safety of the world may be at stake? Why does this creature not speak? Why does it hide itself behind your

fetlocks and not show itself to us?!” One of the zebra’s large gold earrings swayed to and fro with his heated queries. “And for that matter, how did Equestria become the voice for this alien race in the first place?”

An uncomfortable number of voices sounded their agreement for the zebra stallion’s diatribe. Luna barely resisted the urge to vaporize the infantile creature for his insolence.

Luna sighed as the human waved animatedly, pointing to himself and nodding exaggeratedly. She wrestled with the idea for a fraction of a second before deciding. The alicorn lifted her head and gestured to where the human sat. She took another breath before rubbing the side of her head. *I can’t believe I’m doing this...* “Very well... Major Doran? Would you be so kind as to come up here and field a few of the room’s concerns yourself?”

The collection of creatures froze and turned to where the human was sitting, unsure if they had heard correctly that the alien creature they had spent the last twenty minutes arguing over had in fact been in their very midst since the beginning.

The tall biped stood to a dead silent room. He bid farewell to his two seat-companions whom he assured it was nice to have met as he began to shuffle from his place to the aisle. The human walked tall and proud toward the stage which he hopped up to without any apparent struggle.

Luna swung a foreleg toward the podium which he settled behind. He looked out over the mix of creatures. “Good morning,” he began plainly. “For the sake of time and my... Equine friends I will do my best to keep this as concise as possible. For those of you that did not hear, my name is Major Shane Doran. I am an officer in the United States Military, and as you should already know. I am not from this planet.” Everyone in the room was still silent as the grave. “I understand that this not an insignificant event for you. Please understand that this is also the first contact my species has had with alien life, so I share in many of your concerns. You all are as strange to me as I am sure I am to you. First and foremost I wish to impart one thing upon you. My arrival on your planet was purely accidental and I hope to be as unobtrusive as possible. My only goal

as of now is primarily to ensure that my presence does not cause undue harm to the residents of this world. Secondarily I desire to seek a means through which I might find a way back to my own planet. If you have questions, as I am sure you do, I will do my best to answer them now.”

There was a brief painful pause for a good ten seconds before the room exploded with questions and demands and camera flashes. Paws, claws, talons, hooves, and horns all raised in the air hoping to have their question answered.

“You. Go,” Shane pointed at a large cat-like creature in the second row. The room quieted slightly to hear the question.

“Yes, sir. You claim your arrival here was purely accidental. How exactly did here in the first place?”

“I was part of a military research project to conduct testing on a newly developed deep space-faring craft which utilized a very advanced engine to travel great distances instantaneously. One of these engines suffered a malfunction mid-way into the jump and exploded. Somehow the engine dropped us in high orbit around this planet. After numerous attempts to repair our craft failed, orbital decay began to drag us down to the surface where we crashed here in Equestria. Unfortunately I was the only member of the crew to survive the impact, thanks only to the... swift *medical attention* of the Equestrian government.” He motioned toward Princess Luna who stiffened but did not otherwise react.

The sound of quills and pencils on paper was almost deafening as everyone present recorded the information. Several more appendages shot up as the questions began again. It went on for several minutes. Shane would call on someone, answer their question, often as simply and vaguely as possible before moving on.

“You...” Shane called.

“Exactly what manner of relationship do you have with the Equestrian government?”

“I consider the Equestrian government an ally of sorts and have



offered my services and knowledge to them in exchange for their past and future assistance, domicile, and saving my life. And though I have no official or legal written relationship with the Equestrian rulers. I have, however, seen fit to extended my hand in friendship to the Equestrian crown and would consider any unwarranted attack on them or those close to them an attack on myself and would respond accordingly.”

The crowd murmured uncomfortably. Luna cast a sideways glance at Celestia off stage. The solar alicorn seeming to be in a similar state of mild;y confused shock. The human had at no real point announced his position with the Equestrian government so plainly before. To hear him now say so clearly that he considered them allies to the point of indirectly threatening the entire world on their behalf was, while somewhat flattering, unexpected to say the least.

Shane pointed again. “Do you intend on keeping your alliance with Equestria unofficial?”

“For as long as it remains convenient to do so, yes.” He said plainly. “As I’ve said I have no desire to participate in any of your nation’s politics outside what is absolutely required. I am not here to offer guidance nor police your planet,” he assured firmly. “My only current agenda is to find a way back home.” Shane paused as if to emphasize his point. “But...” he continued, “I do understand my presence here, though accidental, will likely affect your policies or economies. I am willing to work with you as necessary to mitigate the effects of my arrival on your lives. But beyond that I hope to remain uninvolved in your internal affairs and maintain no political stance primarily because I do not have one.”

“What is your opinion of this planet so far?”

“I have experienced very little of your planet thus far outside testimonials from the Equestrian alicorns and what I have gleaned from those I have had the privilege of meeting in the castle. If I were forced to categorize you as it stands I would say, *‘primitive yet capable’*.”

Many of the ponies in the audience were unsure if they had been insulted.

Another raised claw, a griffon.

“Major. Obviously as technologically advanced as your species clearly is, it seems unfair that the Equestrian government should hoard these technologies for themselves when the sharing of said technologies could potentially improve or save the lives of millions of creatures in the future.”

“Please understand that what you consider to be *fair*, is of little to no concern to me,” the human said coldly. “But to your point... As part of my agreement with Celestia and Luna, assets I have deemed safe for research by the various species of this planet will be made publicly available provided certain procedures are followed as will be agreed upon given the sensitive nature of the artifacts and limited supply of them.”

Luna once again did her best to suppress a look of confusion. They had at no point reached such an agreement. Shane was making this up as he went along. She had to admit for an unrehearsed unscheduled press conference with an alien audience...the human was doing quite well.

“Major, what exactly do you mean by ‘technologies deemed safe for research?’”

“There were devices or objects on board my vessel which were deemed unsafe or unethical for underdeveloped species such as yourselves to study and I saw to it that all sensitive materials, weapons, data, and dangerous research gathered while I was ‘unable to supervise’ were collected and destroyed. Anything that couldn’t be destroyed remains under my constant surveillance”

Celestia looked to her left where Shane had left his shotgun on a side table backstage. She shook her head and went back to listening.

“Who exactly decided what was or was not, ethical to be studied?” a voice asked hotly.

“***I did***,” Shane said darkly, unspokenly silencing further inquiry on that particular topic.

He pointed again.

A violet stallion stood on his chair. “Is your arrival a sign of the end times?!”

“I don’t know... *probably*. I haven’t really decided yet.” he answered plainly. “You,” he called someone else.

“Major, what makes you so sure that more of your species won’t show up to collect you?”

“Primarily the fact that there is no way for them to know where I am. And any attempts to communicate with them have failed. Space in an endless expanse and I have no idea how far from my homeworld I am. You would be infinitely more likely to happen upon one particular grain of sand on the beach than they would be to happen upon this planet among the upwards of like billions of planets in our galaxy alone, plus the planets in one of any of some-odd hundred billion other galaxies.”

“But what assurance do we have that more will not come?”

Shane shrugged. “**Assurance?** None... You have no assurance that they will not come.”

“What are we expected to do then?”

Shane made a lazy dismissive gesture with one of his hands.

“Whatever you want. Sit there and do nothing. Or if you feel so inclined, go back to your respective countries of origin and raise the largest armies you can muster and point your swords and spears at the sky and wait. It makes no difference to me either way.”

“You’re encouraging us to raise an army against your own people?”

“No army you raise, no matter how large will pose any kind of serious threat to my species should they decide to show up in force.”

“You dismiss the strength of our entire planet of forces so easily?”

Shane scrunched his face at the inquirer. “Your species has barely

scratched the surface of mechanical flight, *I* came here in a *spaceship*. Do the math.” the room was silent “**Yes**, I very confidently dismiss your ‘*strength*’.”He elaborated.

Shane continued to apprehensive silence. “Let me reiterate to you that peace and prosperity is my truest desire. And fond of it thought I may be, I did not come up here to brow-beat. Neither I, nor any of my species have any reason to visit violence upon you. If you walk away from this meeting here today with nothing else...let it be that fact. *That being said...*” he continued. “If we, or our allies, were attacked without due cause you **can be assured** there will be an immediate and *effective* response.”

The crowd was silent.

“Next question.”

~~~~~

Shane sat in the grass outside the dungeon as Philomena hopped from one shoulder to his head to the other.

“I think it went very well.” Shane said as Philomena pecked at a the human’s closed fist. Shane opened his fingers to reveal a singular peanut, which the bird snatched up.

“You mean the threatening of nearly every national representative in the world? Is *that* what you’re saying went well?” Celestia bristled.

“Yeah,” he answered calmly. “It was a nice threat. Sounded good.” He sipped from the second bottle of Cadance’s gifted brandy with his free hand. “I wanted to say it and they wanted to hear it.”

Celestia was just about to retort when Luna interrupted. “I don’t think it’s as bad as you think.” She attempted to soothe her elder sister.

“I fail to see how.”

Luna took a moment to gather the right collection of words. “Look, no matter what was said out there, there would still be contempt

and fear for the human. If he maintains this stance of political disinterest while maintaining his unofficial alliance with us, we are free to continue our business as we see fit when dealing with other nations citing that the human has no finger in Equestrian politics and still enjoy the protection his presence offers. No nation would dare strike out against us militarily because they are afraid of what the human would do. If they are sufficiently frightened of his abilities or the abilities of those who might come to collect him, we are untouchable.”

“I don’t like the idea of lording an alien species over the entire planet like some sort of unspoken deterrent.”

“We don’t have to,” Luna scoffed. “It will be assumed no matter what we say or what public stance we take. We may as well enjoy his privileges while you can. They are few and far between in comparisons to the burdens.” She cast a sideways glance at Shane.

“Was that a dig on me?” he asked with a disinterested smile while he played with Celestia’s phoenix.

“No. It is a fact,” the darker alicorn clarified. “They are afraid of you, wrongfully so, perh-”

“*Rightfully so,*” Shane interrupted proudly.

“BUT,” she narrowed her eyes at the human. “...they will act according to their fear regardless of what we say. They have likely already decided what stance to take and will behave as such. I fear that your assurance of neutrality will lead some to the conclusion that you are ‘*up for sale*’ and others that you have no intention of taking any one side, allowing foreign powers to put pressure on Equestria to relinquish custody of you to them.”

“*Maybe I AM up for sale,*” he winked at the alicorn.

The darker princess scoffed and rolled her eyes dismissively.

“Tempt me, Major. I would sell you in a heartbeat were it not for the fact that the buyer would surely come begging to return you within a fortnight.”

“They aren’t going to come with armies, Luna. They’ll come with sanctions and binding national resolutions. It won’t start with soldiers and spears they’ll send diplomats with contracts.” Celestia tiraded. “What are we to do if say the Zebra tribes refuse to trade with us unless we surrender the human? Force them to sell us their coal? The world can put more pressure on us with a quill than a sword.”

“And they wouldn’t dare touch quill to parchment against our favor because we have what they want. We have already agreed to share everything of educational or technological value. And if any nation decides to get greedy and demand everything for themselves not only will they receive nothing, but they will become the enemy of everyone who’s cut they endanger by threatening us. Should they desire the human himself I would advise them to merely ask him. We have made it abundantly clear that he is not our prisoner nor our subject. He is free to do as he wishes. If he refuses their invitation it is no fault of ours.”

Celestia rubbed her temple. “None of this even accounting for all of those who will fear and attack him for nothing more than being an alien. Or those who decide his existence is an affront to their gods. Or those who believe he is the harbinger of invasion. Not only are the diplomats and soldiers to worry about but spies, assassins, porynappers, saboteurs ... ”

“God damn, I’m almost flattered,” Shane laughed.

“My point being,” Celestia continued. “That there are many things that we have yet to plan for. Stirring the pot this early is dangerous.”

Luna turned on the human. “Major, if Equestria were suddenly under attack from a hostile foreign power, would you feel the need to leap to our rescue?”

He furrowed his brow at the sudden question. “Would you really need me to?” he asked somewhat teasingly. “When you have a perfectly good Shining Armor to send to his death.”

“Humor us...” Luna replied. “If Equestria were under attack would

you pick up your gun and fight on our behalf?"

"You think I should?" he prodded playfully.

"Not really," Luna admitted. "But you did somewhat indirectly promise the international community that attacks against Equestria would be met with your swift and terrible justice..." She pointed out.

"I said I would *respond* to unprovoked attacks. That's all. My response may very well be a strongly worded yelp review," he pointed out.

"That is not how you meant it and we grow weary of your word games," Luna frowned.

Shane hummed contentedly. "*Would I go to war for Equestria?*" he said as if rolling the idea around in his head. "...No." he decided. Luna was about to speak when he continued. "But I'd go to war *for you*." he pointed at the dark alicorn. Sounding oddly sincere despite his questionable sobriety. "Or you," he inclined his head at Celestia. "Or you," he added finally making kissy faces at the phoenix perched on his shoulder. Philomena flared her fiery wings at being included. "Because you're a very pretty girl, yes you are!" The phoenix touched her beak to the human's nose happily. This new biped was proving to be her favorite kind of creature.

Celestia and Luna exchanged an unusual look as they observed the possibly intoxicated human play with Celestia's pet.

"Major, will you be serious for just a moment? Please? This is important," Celestia asked, her tone soft and warm.

Shane's smile melted a little. He sighed apparently sobering himself somewhat. "Look... I don't know what you expect me to say," he confessed. "I don't know anything about politics or ponies or this planet." Shane moved Philomena from his arm to his shoulder. "But I do know that, more often than not, a frightened enemy can be more useful than a dead one." Celestia lifted an eyebrow but otherwise didn't interrupt.

"And while I'd be lying if I said I hadn't grown... *sympathetic* to your

disposition. I might even go as far as to say I am *somewhat* fond of you two. But do I really care about Equestria? No, not really,” he admitted bruntly, allowing his position to sink in for a moment before relenting. “...I care that *YOU* care about your subjects,” he added. “But even though I may not “love” Equestria like you do, some small part of me does still value ideals like justice, freedom, liberty, and the defense of the innocent. *Stupid* though it may be, it would likely compel me to act on your behalf. But realistically what could I even do? If you were faced with a large scale invasion I would, *at best*, be able to tip the scales in any one battle. I may be cocky but I’m not stupid. I am very simply out-manned and undersupplied. In an outright prolonged fight I would probably be overwhelmed fairly quickly. So the only real political weapon I have to help you with is the fear of a bigger stick. I want everyone to know that I have no desire to hurt them, but if pressed that am perfectly capable and willing to. And to have this thought somewhere in their minds that IF they somehow managed to kill me, there is still a chance more humans will show up. Ones that would firebomb their homes to cinders and piss on their ashes scout-sniper style.”

The alicorns didn’t say anything. So Shane continued. “If that was the wrong thing to do...my bad. I’ll keep my mouth shut and let you handle it. But I don’t like that either. There is a good chance a time will come where I can’t rely on you two. If they think I’m your little puppet they’ll just come after you instead. Let them think I’m the real threat. They’ll be too scared to come after me directly and they’d have nothing to gain by targeting you.”

Celestia composed herself. “I believe you are doing what you think is best Shane. I really do. If nothing else I can appreciate the sentiment. And thank you...*really*.” She gave him a meaningful glance. “But...” she tacked on, “You said it yourself. You don’t know anything about our politics. At least talk to us before making a big public grandstand like that in the future.” Shane opened his mouth to argue, but was silenced when Celestia held up a hoof. “I understand your reasoning but despite its potential aid, your stunt also came off as highly combative. And you have **not only** fueled the fears of those who see you as a threat, you planted the idea in the minds of those who did not. We want to *DE*-escalate the



situation. Equus politics are more subtle than you may think. Especially when so many long lived creatures may hold a grudge and plot for centuries or a millennia, or when short lived ones act rashly and immediately. ” Celestia seemed to conclude, refolding her wings and shifting her position on the grass. “Everything we do is a gamble, Major. We are sharing cards and you are raising the pot on a bluff without consulting us...”

The corner of his mouth lifted as he hummed in response but did not otherwise entertain her request.

“You disagree?” Celestia prodded at his lack of meaningful response.

“No,” he assured quietly. “I agree.”

“What then?” Luna demanded.

Shane just shrugged and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. Attempting to light the stick with his silver lighter. The contraption sparked and flared but never birthed a respectable flame. Shane shook the little lighter vigorously, smacking it against his palm a few times. He thumbed the wheel a few more times, causing some depressing sparks to gurgle from the wheel but ultimately fail to produce fire.

He pulled the un-lit cigarette from his lips slowly. Gingerly putting it back in the pack to be smoked at a later time when fire was more readily available. He could have asked either of the infinitely powerful alicorn princesses by his side for a flicker of arcane fire, but he didn't. Probably knowing neither of them were all-together very fond of that particular vice.

Shane sighed and leaned back on the grass. A comfortable silence fell over the trio as they watched the sun sink closer to the horizon. It had been a long day. Shane rolled over onto his feet, causing Philomena to squawk and take to the air. “Alright, I’ve had enough of this. It’s time for a little non-sequitur. Come on,” he beckoned to the alicorns.

“Where are you going?” Celestia asked.

Shane started walking toward the castle. “Let’s go get a drink.”

“We?” Luna repeated curiously shuffling her wings.

Shane turned and made a hurry up motion. “Come on, I think we earned it. Today was busy. *Mysterious radio beacons, changeling attacks, the destruction of my one chance of rescue, press conferences.*” Shane held his arms out. “All in one day! *ONE DAY!* I want a break and you NEED a break. Loosen up for a few hours. It’ll be fun. It also might help work those sticks out of your asses.”

He began to walk, turning to notice the alicorns were not following.

“Come on you guys used to be cool!”

“We are still cool!” Luna asserted hastily scrambling to her hooves as she began trotting after Shane.

“Get Twilight and her little friends, get the griffon, get Aegis, get Cadance, hell invite fuckin’ *Shining Armor* if you want, but this is happening one way or another,” he promised.

Celestia cast an appraising eye over the human, wondering what ulterior motives the biped may have. He usually wanted to be alone. Maybe he really was warming up to them. Maybe he just genuinely had a long day and wanted to have a little fun. Who could say for sure.

“Don’t make me drag you there, Princess...” Shane called back toward the snow white alicorn.

Celestia sniffed in amusement before shaking her head and following after Shane and Luna. *What’s the worst that could happen?*

~~~~~

“We are drinking in the guard tavern?” Luna asked incredulously as she began to recognize the path he was taking. Cadance and her husband had since joined their troupe looking equal parts apprehensive and excited.

“It’s kind of the only bar I know,” Shane admitted. “Why? Is that a problem?”

"We would not call it a problem per se," she replied. "We usually allow this to be our guards retreat from their duties. Our presence, we fear, may soil their escape from...well... us."

"You know," Shane started to answer as they walked. "I've noticed something about you all and your '*subjects*'. For some reason, they really do seem to love you," he nodded. He looked over his shoulder at the alicorns. "But...they are terrified of you."

"They are not *terrified of us*." Celestia objected.

"Don't lie to yourself, Princess. You know they are. How could they not be? You're an immortal horse goddess that has ruled over them since their grandparent's grandparent's grandparent's grandparent's... **grandparent's**."

"Yes, I get it. *I'm old*. Thank you," she interrupted causing Cadance to stifle a giggle. "What is your point?"

"*My point*..." he muttered to himself as if it should have been obvious. He turned back to his walking. "I once saw my battalion commander do a keg-stand surrounded by a bunch of rowdy Lance Corporals at the Marine Corps Ball," Shane began out of nowhere. "Now I was a wee young boot at the time so the BC was, to me, this untouchable lofty creature that existed only as a photograph on a plaque outside the company office. A man in a high tower who waved his hand and made decisions that sent young men like me to die every day. And you know what I felt upon seeing that man's shoes up in the air, chuggin cheap beer straight from the tap?" he asked the group. "Comfort," he answered without waiting for a response. "I was comforted. Was it the most dignified thing for a man of his position to do? No. But it reminded me that deep down that mysterious creature was just like us. At one time he was in our shoes, and at his core he was still that person. And I want *them* to feel that about *you*."

They arrived outside the tavern itself. They could already hear the boisterous sound of the occupants inside. Celestia was almost speechless. In its own way it was a...genuinely thoughtful gesture. She was almost concerned about the human.

Shane continued. "Especially since there is a fair chance you WILL be sending them to die, somewhat indirectly because of me. So we're gonna go in there, and you're going to **ask** to join them," he said to the alicorns. "And we're gonna drink, laugh, and we're gonna have fun and forget for a few hours that the world is burning. And if there's a keg in there so help me god you're gonna do a keg stand."

Before they could respond Shane bodily shoved the pair of alicorns through the swinging doors. Celestia was thrust into the darkened tavern along with her sister. Like last time every pony in the room turned and saw their rulers at the entrance way, making a mad scramble to right themselves and bow to their diarchs.

Celestia raise a hoof to stop them. "Please, my little ponies, be at ease. I assure you We are not here to interrupt your night," she soothed motherly.

A young officer raised his head, a slight blush in his cheeks from a few drinks and clearly not sure of what was going on. He cleared his throat and spoke anyway. "How, maywe be of service, yer highness?"

"There's no need for that, Lieutenant. We know the past few weeks have been stressful for you all. I want you all to know that your service is appreciated. We are happy to see that you have a chance to relax and enjoy yourselves. I while I know the last thing you probably wanted to see on your time off was your boss." she said with a smile that got more than a few chuckles from the collected guards. "But we hope that tonight you allow us this small intrusion. If you would have us we were hoping to join you tonight to celebrate the work you've done."

There was a terrible pause as the collected stallions and mares processed her request. Perhaps Shane was wrong. Maybe they did fear her. She cursed herself for allowing some bipedal alien to put her in such a predicament. She surely looked a fool.

A single drunken unicorn guard nearly fell off his stool as he raised his glass. "TO THE PRINCESS!"

Relief washed over her as the entire bar cheered their affirmation, seeming much more thrilled by the idea than Celestia feared they would be.

The doors behind them were kicked open as if on cue by the human who silenced the applause and earned many bizarre looks from the collection of bar ponies. Celestia turned to see he had a flailing Shining Armor thrown bodily over his shoulder and an amused Cadance tucked under his arm by the barrel. *Why* she had no idea. Whatever had transpired in the hallway in such a short period of time was beyond her.

Shane dropped Shining Armor to the ground like a sack of potatoes as he made his way passed the alicorns into the bar. He raised his free arm into the air prophetically. “*SOLDIERS OF EQUESTRIA, ALL YOU CAN DRINK ON ME!!!*” he shouted.

The uproar of cheers from the crowd were deafening as hooves stomped and cheers went out.

Shane set Cadance on the ground gingerly. “See?” he told the pink alicorn. “My cheers were louder than Celestia’s”

~~~~~

A bar-pony set a tray down complete with a large bottle of amber liquid along with several empty low-ball glasses at the booth that Shane shared with Celestia, Cadance and Shining Armor. Luna had long since delved into one of her many historic war stories which she regaled a group of young guardsponies at the other end of the bar.

Shane took the bottle preemptively, pulling the cork with his teeth and spitting it uselessly onto the floor. He flipped the glasses in front of each of his table mates with practiced ease. “So an *Empress* eh?” He began, eyeballing the Pink alicorn of Love with a mixture of dubiousness and admiration. “Love the title. *Empress of the Crystal Empire.*” Shane repeated as he poured a small amount into each of the now turned glasses with the exception of Shining Armor who’s glass was filled near to the spilling point. “Have you ever given any thought to annexing Equestria? You seem like a much

funner co-conspirator than the two insufferable alicorns I currently find myself in cahoots with.”

Cadance laughed. The alien clearly didn’t really understand the relationship between the two regions. Not that he had any reason to, she rationalized. And since she was like...*roughly* ninety-ish percent sure he was joking she decided there was no harm in playing along. “You know the thought has occasionally crossed my mind,” she teased with a scoff from her aunt. “And though a glorious coup it would surely be... I think you’ll find a few ponies might not be overly fond of the prospect.”

Shane pfft’d. “You mean them?” he stuck a thumb at Celestia with one hand and leveled the other thumb in the general direction of Luna. “Honey, I’ll kill them *right now*. You could just waltz in and take the place. Their military is a joke. I’ve seen it.” He assured.

Celestia hummed as she sipped her glass of whiskey with the same mildly pleased expression she sipped her tea with. “Oh yes. I am sure a brutish *drunk* shall succeed in killing me where the legions of evil and darkness have failed.”

Shane ignored her and turned back toward Cadance. “I’ll even make you a deal,” he tapped the table a few times. “I’ll kill Celestia and Luna and I will hand you Equestria on a silver platter...if you agree to divorce Shining Armor, right now.”

Cadance rubbed her hoof against her chin thoughtfully humming intently. “Hmmm...tempting indeed.”

Shining even cracked a smile. “Keep dreaming, my love. You’d have more to lose in that divorce than I would.” He winked at his royal wife who laughed somewhat awkwardly.

“You might be surprised,” she answered cryptically drawing curious head-cocks from both Shiny and Shane respectively.

“I GOT EM!” Pinkie Pie roared as she rocketed through the doors with every single squirming element of harmony wrapped in her forelegs.

“Atta girl!” Shane cupped a hand to his mouth and complimented the young cotton candy colored earth pony on her retrieval of additional party guests. .

“Pinkie Pie! Put me down this very instant!” Rarity’s fury echoed throughout the bar causing more than a few guardsponies to chuckle goodnaturedly at their expense.

A crack of energy flashed as Twilight teleported herself away from the clingy kidnapping pink party pony. She re-appeared by the table that Cadance shared with Shining Armor and the human, she took a breath of relief only to be snatched off the ground by the scruff of the neck by Shane who make a happy sound as he deposited her next to him in their little booth.

“That *kinda hurts* you know. I’m not a puppy.” She shot the human a dirty look as she rolled her shoulders and settled into the booth.

Shane ignored her. “You wanna drink, Sparky? We’re having one,” he stated as if to entice her into it, even going as far as to wiggle the bottle a little bit, causing the amber liquid to slosh slightly.

Twilight sighed exhaustedly. “You know what? Sure.” she caved. Shane brightened and set a cup in front of the young purple mare, pouring a small amount into her glass.

“Finish your drink, *Captain*,” he added, turning on the stallion with narrowed eyes and spitting the word *captain* out with the same inflection one usually reserved for words like *maggot* or *scum*.

Shining Armor recognized a challenge when he saw one. Celestia’s advice echoed somewhere in the back on his head. Childish though it seemed, even for Shane. The stallion dumped the entirety of the glass down his throat, making sure not to show any sign of discomfort as the liquid fire blazed down his gullet. Deciding very boldly to raise the stakes a little. He licked his teeth and pushed his glass toward the human tapping his hoof on the table expectantly.

Shane’s head cocked almost imperceptibly as he failed to keep the grin off his face. “Alright, *boy scout*. Let’s play.” He muttered nearly sounding pleased. He leveled the bottle back toward Shiny and

filled the stallions cup up once more. Shining Armor threw back the second glass as easily as the first. Shane pursed his lips and almost nodded.

Twilight shrugged as she attempted to mimic her brother by downing her own glass, coughing and sputtering as the whiskey hit her tongue. Shane laughed and patted the unicorn on the back. "Get it girl! Git you some!" He encouraged. As she blinked the tears out of her eyes. Shane rubbed her back affectionately until her episode passed. "Maybe you should go to the bar and get a ...wine spritzer or something?" Twilight nodded and sniffled as she slid out of the booth and headed toward the bar. "Tell them you want a Zinfandel!" Twilight waved a hoof dismissively as she walked away.

"Why Zinfandel?" Celestia asked as she sipped at her own glass of whiskey, blowing the heat from her throat.

Shane watched Twilight disappear through the crowd toward the bar. "My sister liked Zinfandels..." he commented quietly. Turning back toward the table pouring himself another large drink. "She'd put *ICE CUBES* in them..." He shook his head disapprovingly as he swallowed the rest of his drink. He pushed Cadance's glass a little closer to her with his free hand to indicate his desire for the pink alicorn to indulge in the festivities, of which, she had thus far abstained.

Cadance's smile became forced. She looked up from her drink to the human who peered over his glass, apparently not failing to take notice of her hesitation. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

A sudden commotion drew their attention. Applejack was smiling wildly as she hog tied a guard who had, in his inebriated state, apparently gotten a little too grabby. Shane stuck his finger and thumb in his mouth, producing an ear-splitting whistle. "BEAT HIS ASS, TRISH!" He shouted encouragingly. "Better go save your boy there, Captain," Shane laughed.

Shining Armor was already maneuvering out of the booth. "Yeah," he sighed. He may have been off-duty but he was still responsible for the safety of his soldiers, and Applejack may have been a national heroine, but she wasn't known for pulling punches.



Cadance took the distraction to toss the contents of the whiskey glass over her shoulder very discreetly. She adopted a sour face as she slapped the glass back on the table with a satisfying clack. She fanned herself slightly with a hoof to play it off a bit even managing to water up her eyes.

Shane grinned at the pink alicorn, as he re-filled his own glass. Celestia tsk'd as the last of the amber liquid fell into the glass. "You're going to make yourself sick....again." She chided.

Shane groaned. "Jesus, could you just stop being my mom for like a few hours? Please? I don't know if you recall, But I kinda lost my only chance at rescue about...oh..." Shane looked at his broken watch. "Like four hours ago? Roughly?. I'm coping. Just let it happen." He downed his drink.

"What?" Cadance asked clearly not fully up to speed.

"Long story..." Shane dismissed wincing slightly.

Twilight made her way back toward the group with a pink Zinfandel in her magic, accompanied by Rarity

"Hello, Major," she cooed as she approached alongside Twilight, a light blue colored cocktail in a martini glass held aloft in her own magic.

Shane turned toward the unicorns with a pleased smile. "Ms. Rarity, how kind of you to join us."

The mare cleared her throat as she glanced back toward Pinkie Pie, who was currently nosing Fluttershy toward the bar. "Yes, well, I'd like to say I was summoned willingly but seeing as we're all here now. We may as well make the best of it, wouldn't you say?"

"I would," he gestured at Shining Armor's empty seat. "Please."

Rarity lowered her nose toward the floor, "Your highnesses."

"Please dispense with the formalities, my little pony. We are "off the clock" if you will." Celestia chuckled.

Rarity smiled and settled into the booth with Twilight and Cadance.

“So,” Shane began. “How’ve you been?”

Rarity laughed, “Over the passed few hours since we last saw each other?”

“Just a few hours?” He shook his head. “Time *does* seem to drag on when you aren’t around.”

Rarity’s cheeks grew a few shades darker but she smiled all the same. “Oh do be careful, Major. If I were less astute I daresay I would think you were flirting with me.”

Shane grinned back, “I think you’re very astute. But if we’re being candid I’m really only using you to try and make Celestia jealous.”

The alicorn actually started to laugh at her sudden and unexpected inclusion, playing along. “Make *ME* jealous? I seem to recall you refusing my invitation to my bed, Major...”

Twilight started to choke on her drink.

Shane continued without missing a beat. “Far be it from me to *try* and make an honest woman of you...tryna give it up on the second date and such,- OW!” he exclaimed as Celestia cuffed him on the back of the head with her wing.

~~~~~

The night wore on. Celestia could not accurately recall a time where she had smiled so genuinely for so long. She, of course, maintained her dignity as a ruler and alicorn. None too keen on getting obliterated in front of her guards and soldiers. She did however allow herself to mingle amongst her mortal subject to a degree she normally would not have. She prided herself on her ability to remember and memorize the names and faces of her staff but there was no way to meet them all, much less remember them.

She met many a stallion or mare in her service that night, several because they had wandered too close to Shane who would pluck them from the ground and deposit them in the booth to be

questioned. “Research on ponykind” is what he kept calling it. *Interview and assess. Catch and release.* He would often demand their opinion of the government or Celestia’s ability to rule, directly in front of the alicorn, the ponies would be flustered and scramble for an inoffensive answer. Celestia took it in stride, but one thing became abundantly clear. Shane was right, these ponies may love her...but they were indeed terrified of her. She began to wonder if the human was doing this on purpose, to prove his point by wounding her where he knew she was most vulnerable. More likely he was simply attempting to play with her, much like he did with Luna.

While Celestia had no intention of drinking to excess, Shane had no such inhibitions. Imbibing spirits of all colors and flavors and throwing himself into the festivities. He fled from sobriety like one might run from a pack of wolves.

Shane was currently leaning against Luna, who was, while more sober than the human, extremely inebriated as well.

“I think we better call this one a night,” Celestia said worryingly to Cadance and Twilight. “Shane is *suppose* to lead an expedition into Whitetail Wood tomorrow. And Luna and I have meetings all day.”

A noise drew their attention. Shane was slowly pounding an empty mug against the wooden table. Creating a steady rhythm that echoed throughout the bar as everypony stopped their conversations to watch the intoxicated human.

Luna began to tap her hoof against the table in the same rhythm. Shane began to hum the tune to a song nopony could recognize. Several other guards joined in, pounding hooves against the tables or floor. Soon there was a semblance or harmony to the sharp beat, and the human’s tune and it filled the bar.

Shane opened his mouth and began to sing over the resonating hooves.

***“In the deep, dark hills of eastern Kentucky,  
...that’s the place where I trace my bloodline!”***

He sang with the wild abandon of a man who was too far gone to care about what others may have thought. And though the human was no professional, his song was sorrowful and haunting, as if all the pain and loss and fear he had bottled inside him came out all the sudden.

*And it's there I read on a hillside gravestone,*

*You'll never leave Harlan alive..."*

Ponykind was no stranger to the sudden spontaneous song, the magic of Harmony permeated Equestria like radiation permeated Chernobyl. But this felt different. It was not a hopeful or optimistic tune. It was a song of hardship and toil, and yet so full of pride and longing. He was singing his goodbye to home. Dangerous and flawed, much like himself, it was still his home. Celestia became intimately aware she was witnessing a significant event. Even if the human himself did not know it. A new chapter of his life was laid before him. But moving on meant leaving parts of himself behind.

Shane finished out his song as he leaned back on his stool a little too far to hit the final notes. He fell backwards with a thunderous crash and his massive frame smash a few smaller stools to splinters. The stallions and mares cheered for the drunk alien as he threw up a thumb to indicate his well being.

The final notes of the human's song echoed in her ears. "Yep," she agreed with herself. It's time to go. Cadance, Shining Armor, can you get Shane back to his cell? I'm going to take Luna back to her room."

"I think we can handle it," Cadance winked at Shining Armor who blushed, not really understanding why his wife was suddenly being flirty.

A barely conscious Shane was thrown over Shining Armor's back via Cadance's magic. The stallion groaned slightly, but despite the human's density, stood firm. He was heavy but nothing the stallion couldn't handle. His height was the tricky part. Fully draped over Shiny his arms and legs still grazed the ground. It was a careful balancing act.

“Wherewe goin?” The human slurred.

“You’re going to bed,” Shiny said as they made their way toward the door.

“Goodnight Chesty!” Shane shouted at the guards who were left in the bar, who raised their glasses and cheered back. Shane seeming satisfied with the response appeared to fall back asleep.

Celestia held Luna by her side with a snow white downy wing. Luna was still ambulatory, but she did sway quite a bit if left on her own. “Goodnight my little ponies. Thank you for an unforgettable night, but I am afraid we must get back to business as usual.” There was an audible groan of disappointment from the bar. “We bid you all a goodnight.” She inclined her head Luna followed suit. The stallions and mares cheered for their diarchs until they disappeared through the doors.

“That was fun,” Luna said simply.

“I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t enjoyed myself.” Celestia admitted. She spotted Shining Armor and Cadance hauling off the human who had begun to mumble-sing another song as he was taken to bed. His final words still ringing in Celestia’s head.

~~~~~

*“-there stood a log cabin made of earth and wood, where lived a captain boot named **Shiney B Goode**,”* Shane half sang as he swayed on the back of the stallion, presumably changing the words to include him. *“Who never ever learned to screw or fight so well but somehow got a hot wife, at least from what I can tell...”* he reached out and poked Cadance in the side. The alicorn giggled shying out of the human’s reach. *“Go! Go! Go, Shiney go!”*

The pair of ponies ventured into the dungeon, Shining Armor leading Cadance to Shane’s cell. “You’ve been keeping him here?” she asked distastefully.

“He practically demanded to stay here. Princess Celestia has apparently been trying to get him to move in to the castle for

weeks.” Shining Armor ventured into the human’s room, carefully rolling him off of his back and into the cot. The human was just laying there with closed eyes and a sort-of dizzy smile on his face.

“Watch him for a second,” Shining Armor asked the pink alicorn. “I’m gonna see who’s on his guard shift tonight.” Cadance nodded gesturing the stallion out the door.

Cadance looked around the room. Soft padded walls and floor. She wondered how long the human had been in this room. All manner of alien devices and weapons lay around. She prodded a dark obsidian tablet with her hoof, curiously.

“Don’t touch that,” Shane croaked from his cot. Cadance pulled her hoof back and folded her ears. Shane hadn’t opened his eyes or moved at all. She wondered how he had seen her. She apologized anyway.

“So how far along are you?” he asked casually. Cadance’s froze. Had she heard correctly? Shane turned his head and opened one eye curiously at the alicorn, clearly seeing the panic on her face. “Oh it’s still a secret.” He muttered. “He doesn’t know yet does he?” Shane smiled wickedly and began to chuckle, before becoming suddenly serious. “He is the father, right?”

Cadance turned on the human, “Of course he’s the father! What kind of mare do you think I am!?”

Shane threw up his hands defensively, “M jus' askin'!”

“I just... haven’t found the right time to tell him yet!” she defended. “I had it all planned out but then *you* happened!”

“Yeah, okay. Like it's my fault,” he laughed humorlessly.

“How did you even know?” she asked in a hushed tone.

Shane shrugged. He closed his eyes, seeming to go back to sleep. “I took a guess.”

“Just...” Cadance looked back at the door apprehensively. “Please don’t tell him yet,” she begged. I’ll tell him soon I just wanted it to

be special.”

“What’s gonna be special?” Shining Armor asked as he entered back in the room.

Cadance squeaked as she spun toward the stallion. “Oh nothing!” She smiled sweetly. “Just talking to the Major.”

Shiny chuckled as he approached the prone biped. “Must’ve been a boring conversation.” He waved his hoof in front of the human’s face. Shane was out like a light, dead to the world. His chest rose and fell as he snored softly, sure to wake up to a terrible hangover the next day.

Shiny turned back toward his wife. Cadance had a troubled distant expression on her face. “Are you alright?” he asked growing concerned.

Cadance snapped back to reality. “Yes! I mean, it’s nothing. I’m just tired. Long day, you know.” She chuckled nervously.

Shiny smiled, nuzzling his wife affectionately. “Come on, let’s go get some sleep.”

Cadance took one last look at the sleeping alien. Hoping he had heard her before passing out. And hoping further still that he could keep a secret...at least for a little while.

# ARTICLE 2 Part XIX

## ARTICLE 2

### *Part XIX*

. The sun was several hours from rising. It was technically early morning, but still so dark it was nigh indistinguishable from the night. Aegis made his way into the dungeon complex to retrieve the human. Against his better wishes the biped had convinced the alicorns to lend him two centuries of troops for a reconnaissance operation deep into the heart of the Whitetail Woods. How he had managed to do it, the stallion had no idea. It made Aegis' stomach unsettle. If the media learned that this supposedly "neutral" alien was suddenly commanding Equestrian troops then it would no doubt spark international outrage.

Regardless many young officers throughout the legions were throwing themselves at the opportunity to work with the alien. Now that the human was revealed to the public eye, ponies were chomping at the bit to be a part of history. Even if the mission was largely uneventful, most officers knew that anypony who managed to be a part of it would undoubtedly have their names included in history books for ages to come.

Aegis crossed the threshold into the dungeon, making his way directly to the human's room. Celestia was due to join them shortly. Aegis did not see the need to wait for the solar diarch as he made his way to Shane's cell.

Two stallions fired off crisp salutes as he approached, ever-awake despite the odd hour. Aegis returned the gesture as he passed entered the cell. Shane was sitting on his cot with his head cradled in his hands as if in serious pain. Aegis eyed the bipid up and down. He was fully dressed. His desert digital camouflage utilities now replaced with a darker woodland pattern that the guard commander had yet to see. He sported his armored chest assembly in full, complete with ablative pauldrons, pads, and helmet which sat dutifully by his smartly bloused combat boots. He was dressed for a



fight, but his face made it seem like he was ready to vomit.

Aegis sighed, more than one of his soldiers had reported that the human had coordinated some manner of drunken celebration only a few hour prior. Despite knowing the human's fondness for the drink he had hoped the biped would manage to keep some level of discretion given the large scale reconnaissance operation he was responsible for.

"Are you alright, Major?"

Shane uncovered his eyes, squinting as they adjusted to the light. "...sir.." he mumbled. "Right as rain," he assured.

"You don't look it," Aegis commented as he approached. "I trust my soldiers will be in responsible hands during this mission?"

Shane snorted, "I can assure you, Commander, I have orchestrated substantially more complicated operations, far more hungover than I am now. Your soldiers will be fine."

Aegis hummed. "Princess Celestia will be joining us for the op-order shortly. I've picked out two Centuries for you. They are currently being assembled for the mission briefing."

"You selected them?"

"Hoof picked," he nodded.

"You trust them?" Shane rubbed his temples.

"I do. I trained the Centurions myself some years ago."

"Centurions?" he asked clearly confused.

"Century Commanders. These are military troops, Major. Not Guardsponies. They are organized differently."

Shane shrugged off the new information. "Is the convoy ready?"

"They should be organizing for take-off as we speak. All we need is the brief."

“Alright,” Shane rubbed his eyes one last time as he pushed himself to his feet. He shouldered his assault pack, stuffed with whatever the biped had decided he would need for the next three days. His rifle slung dutifully across his chest. It was the first time Aegis had seen the human really use the weapon. Were they not on a schedule he would have set aside more time to reflect upon it.

The two made their way out of the cell where they were greeted by a solar alicorn, looking much better for wear than the human. If she had consumed too much alcohol the night prior, her complexion hid it well.

Aegis lowered his head and greeted his princess. Celestia inclined her head also. Shane watched the two of them with nauseous indifference.

“Overdo it a bit, Major?” she smirked at the human. “You look a little green around the gills.” Shane lifted the corner of his lip at the alicorn in a sort of unamused snarl. “Honestly I somewhat surprised you’re awake.” Her horn began to glow as she levitated a large disposable cup of hot coffee toward the human.

Shane didn’t say anything but a contented groan escaped him as he took hold of the cup.

Celestia turned toward the exit as the human followed along with the guard commander.

~~~~~

. The room was packed with noisy Equestrian legionnaires. The military caste of Equestria’s Ministry of Civil Defense. Unlike their counterparts in the guard, these ponies wore a slightly more simplistic steel plate armor. Two centuries sat in the overly crowded auditorium. Each century was made up of roughly eighty stallions and mares, of which maybe twenty or so pegasi would specialize as aerial reconnaissance.

The human was hastily brought up to speed on the basic structure of the troops over which he would soon be in command. Aegis could only hope he had paid attention during their short walk.

The room went eerily silent as the collected stallions and mares of Celestia's military observed the Princess of the Sun enter the room followed by the alien biped and current Commander of the Guard. There was a clatter as nearly one hundred and sixty ponies rushed to stand and bow their heads to their diarch.

Shane stepped passed the alicorn, humming and patting her on her withers. "Attention on deck, eh?" he muttered smiling as he set down his pack and helmet.

Aegis made his way into the room. "At ease!" The ponies made their way back into their seats. Aegis waited for the clatter of armor to subside before he began to speak. Aegis cleared his throat. "Good morning, mares and gentlecolts. I would like to begin by thanking you all for your volunteering to assist the crown with this operation. I understand it may be a bit..." Aegis glanced back at Shane who sipped his coffee and winked at the stallion. "...unorthodox. But crucial all the same. Equestria thanks you for your service."

Aegis moved around the room as he spoke. "As I am sure most of you are aware our planet recently was graced with the presence of an extraterrestrial visitor in the form of the Major here." He motioned toward the human who gave a very half hearted two-fingered salute. "Some of you have already become acquainted with the Major, others may have seen him during drills. For the duration of this operation you will answer to him." There was a smatter of uncertain muttering amongst the crowd. "Your unit leaders have already received a briefing packet. The explanation of which I will leave mostly to him. The put it bluntly, he is in need of bodies to assist in a reconnaissance operation deep within the heart of Whitetail Woods. Her highness has deemed fit to have you all fulfill that need. I have assured him that you all are quite capable and prime example of Equestrian bravery and fortitude. Do not disappoint me." He added finally. Before retreating back toward Celestia. "All yours, Major."

Shane took gulp of his coffee before stepping forward. "Good morning, Equestrians!" he practically shouted at the group, who straightened in their seats. A few muttered back an uncertain response. Shane paused casting an irritated glare toward the crowd.

“No, that was pathetic....Good. Morning. Equestrians!” he shouted at the crowd.

“GOOD MORNING, SIR!” the ponies shouted back.

“THAT’S IT!” the human smiled. “Are you awake now!?”

“YES, SIR!”

“Good!” Shane smirked. “Now! For those of you who are hard of hearing I will reiterate... My name is Major Shane Doran, United States Marine Corps, and I will be leading this operation” Shane looked over the collected equines. “I can reasonably say that I have never had the privilege of commanding furry quadrupeds in the field. I am eager to see how you all perform. You come very highly recommended.” He gestured toward the Guard Commander. “Alright ladies and gents, I am just going to jump right into it. Squad and platoon leaders please identify yourselves.”

Aegis stepped forward, “Centurions and optio’s stick your hooves in the air.”

Four ponies toward the front of the room raised their hooves. Two with ornate eagles on the front of their breast plates. The commanders of their respective centuries. One stallion and one mare. Shane pointed at the four of them. “You both and you number two’s are going to stay behind after the brief I need to talk to you.” Both ponies nodded dutifully.

“Alright here’s the long and short of it, boys and girls. We are running a recon op into a piece of forest land Southwest of here called *Whitetail Woods*.” Shane turned toward a large screen behind him. “Hey uh, Celestia, do the lights will you?” he asked the silent alicorn. Celestia’s horn lit as the room grew dim and a large map appeared on the screen. “This is our AO. Five square miles of forested countryside...”

Shane went on to describe the land, weather, expected maneuvers, and even which sections would be responsible for searching which plot of land. This search was to last a full week. The human himself only to be there for the first three days. “We will be conducting five

major sweeps. Ponies with wings please identify yourselves.” Several Pegasi stuck their hooves in the air awkwardly. Shane counted them and wrote the figure down on a black notebook he had stolen off Luna’s desk. “You all will be detached from your current sections and be formed into an aerial reconnaissance squadron. Whoever is the most senior among you please remain behind after the briefing as well. The rest of you will be on the line. I don’t care if you have a horn on your head or not. I have no need of magic so for this op you’re ground-pounders, oorah?”

Several ponies looked around with confused expressions.

Shane sighed, “Do you understand?” he clarified. The ponies shouted back that they did indeed understand.

It wasn’t until the human paused and asked for questions that one brave pony stuck her hoof in the air. Shane pointed at her. “Yes?”

“Yes sir, um...what is it exactly we’re looking for?”

Shane nodded. “Good question. Did everybody hear her? She asked what it was we’re looking for,” he repeated. “To answer your question, I do not know.” Shane let that sink in for several seconds while the legionnaires shared uncertain glances among themselves. “To put it simply. I am under the impression that there is some manner of device or object that is sending a signal from somewhere within that grid. I can not honestly say what it might be because I do not know. For now I want you to do this. If you see anything at all out of the ordinary, something you can not easily explain, or something you can not identify. You are to stop. Mark down the exact grid. Cordon off the area, retreat to a safe distance and radio me immediately. I will be there shortly to asses the situation. Does everyone understand?”

~~~~~

. Yellow Jacket shrugged her armor into a more comfortable position. It seemed luck was not on her side today, finding herself the most senior pegasi scout, and as such she had been outfitted with an uncomfortable human radio communication device strapped to her head. A soft round pad cupped one of her ears while

a strip of springy plastic reached over her head to hold it in place. A swiveling lever extended from the pad toward her mouth. Devoid of her helmet she brushed a lock of jet black mane from her eyes. The headset preventing her from brushing it behind her ear. She growled in frustration, removing the human's device and shaking out her mane. She brushed as much of it as she could behind her dusty yellow ears before donning the radio once more. The human gave her a hasty course in the use of the device. Push the button to talk, let go when you're done. "Just remember; *Hey you, this is me*. Wait for a response then say what you gotta say." He had instructed.

She had never held any significant leadership role in her life much less leading a small squadron. On one of the most historic military operations in recent history no less. A Joint exercise with an alien military. If she pulled it off it would look phenomenal on her promotion and retention board. But if she failed. Not only could she kiss any sort of military career goodbye, but word on the street was the alien was going to kill and eat anypony who failed him. Was it true? Probably not. But some instinct deep down in her pony brain couldn't let the idea go. One of the many drawbacks of being a herd species.

The mare turned to the some odd forty pegasi that were collected from the two centuries. Two were tasked out to the personal detail of the human. He selected them himself. After determining that not a one of the collected ponies had seen real combat, he opted to choose the ones who had at least participated in counter-offensives during the diamond dog raids. "I guess that's close enough," he had muttered, seeming disappointed after learning that the conflict produced no casualties on either side.

Minus those two, that left her with thirty-seven pegasi. One century was a wing light due to a scout contracting feather flu a few days prior. She quickly divided the group into four sections, three of ten and one of seven. She placed herself in the smaller more maneuverable group.

A voice erupted in her ear. "*Raptor Actual, this is Atlas...*"

Raptor?...Oh Celestia that was her! The human was talking to her

on the radio. Her heart began to thump. As she fumbled to depress the button on the side. "This is Yell- Raptor!" she corrected herself.

There was a pause on the headset. "Status?"

She depressed the button again, "All Raptor sections are ready for takeoff. Just give us the word."

*"Roger, I want one final count, once you have accountability I want you to run the numbers up to me. I need that sharpish I want you guys wheels-up in ten, how copy?"*

"Raptor Actual copies all."

*"Atlas out,"*

The radio went silent.

She proceeded to, once again count the pegasi under her command. She was almost disappointed by how much leadership revolved around counting things. Count the troops, count the weapons, count the packs, count the troops again. Run up the numbers. Recount them all to verify the numbers. Count the number of times she'd counted.

She reached the end of her section. There were still thirty-seven pegasi. She radioed the human to confirm. She was curtly told to 'standby'. Their ten minute takeoff goal came and went in this time. When she called the human to inquire what was happening, she was once again to 'standby' this time more harshly. She didn't ask a third time.

An additional twenty minutes dragged on before she was given the order to takeoff. Which she promptly did, eager to get her hooves off the ground. Their four section formation made a B-Line for Whitetail Wood. All things considered they had a fairly easy job, pretty much what they usually did. Aerial Recon. They simply had to clear the skies over the plot of land before the rest of the centuries got there. Easy enough.

She could hear the Centuries behind them on her radio. Count the troops, count the weapons, count the packs, count the transports...

She was glad to be done with the counting for now.

~~~~~

. Celestia eyeballed the convoy as they made the final preparations to launch. The sun was due to crest at any moment. She ran the numbers herself several times. Thirty-seven ponies in the air, plus an additional one hundred and eighteen loaded twelve transport ships. Left him with two pegasi stallions a unicorn mare and an earth pony mare. All of whom would be his personal detail. He would occasionally touch his headset and talk to the Century leaders and their second in command. All of whom had been similarly outfitted with callsigns and headset radios. Celestia had the last of the human's headsets tucked under her wing. Shane had instructed the alicorn to deliver it to Luna as soon as the convoy left. Luna would keep the device while Celestia was in court and vice versa. In the event of an emergency Shane would use it to contact them.

Shane received his final batch of numbers. Shane stepped into his open carriage. It was similar to Celestia's own, however much more spartan. "Color me impressed, Major. All things considered you're doing very well."

"This ain't my first rodeo, princess." He said over his sunglasses which he wore even though the sun had yet to rise. But smiled at the praise nonetheless.

"Even still. I am quite envious of these." She held up the radio headset. "I think adapting these to ponies should be among the first things we attempt."

Shane scribbled something in his notebook. "They do come in handy. How do you guys even do stuff like this without radios?"

We have messengers, or voice projection gems."

"Voice projection whats?" he asked confused.

Sandy, the unicorn in his entourage, cleared her throat to draw his attention. She offered the human a blood red ruby almost the size of



a grape. “You hold it to your throat and it projects your voice.

Shane looked at her incredulously, holding the ruby to his neck. “Check” he said at perfectly normal volume. Shane raised an eyebrow at Sandy who nervously took the gem back holding it to her throat. “**CHECK**” her voice echoed across the field. Drawing the attention of nearly every pony in the area. Shane furrowed his brow and tried again. Only for the gemstone to lose its inner shine the moment he touched it.

Celestia frowned. The human’s tendency to disrupt magical energies struck again. Flomoxing to say the least. When time allowed a more thorough investigation would be necessary.

Shane seemed to understand what was going on. He stepped over to his pack and pulled out a roll of black tape. Grinning hopefully to himself. He deftly taped the two earpieces of his music player to the gem. He fished the device itself out of his pocket, and the gem began to noticable project the buds music.

Shane laughed, sufficiently delighted. “How loud does this go?” he asked the armored unicorn.

“It multiplies the volume it hears so the louder you talk the louder it is.”

“This is gonna be fun.” he announced giddily. Shane reached up and touched his headset. “Let’s light this candle. All Atlas Victors roger-up when you have accountability and are ready to roll.”

*“Saber-Team, Roger.”*

*“Prophet, Roger*

*“Misfit, Roger”*

*“Razor, Roger. We’re ready to go.”*

“Good to go, All Atlas Victors we are wheels up in two minutes.”

Shane stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled at the stallions pulling his carriage. “Two minutes!” he shouted. They nodded and

pulled their goggles over their eyes.

Celestia stepped over to the side of the human's carriage. "Major. There are one hundred and fifty-nine of my subjects on this excursion of yours. If you come back with a single pony less. I shall be very cross with you."

Shane didn't look up from fiddling with his music device. "Bringin' em all back dead or alive. You got it."

Celestia stomped a hoof. "**ALIVE!**" she demanded. "And unharmed."

"Fine." he rolled his eyes.

"You have exactly three days Major, whether you find something or not. That means you will be on the castle grounds exactly seventy-two hours from now."

Shane checked his watch and donned his helmet. "Yep, roughly seventy-two hours," he affirmed.

"No! Not '*roughly*'. Do NOT make me come get you human. So help me, I will make a life sentence in Tartarus look like a day at the beach for you."

Shane cooed. "You know, you're kinda hot when you're mad."

"I'm serious!"

Shane took off his sunglasses and stared into the alicorns bright pink eyes. "Will you relax? We're walking around the woods. Not marching off to combat. It. Will. Be. Fine. Go turn-on the sun or whatever it is you do. Stop being a helicopter-mom." Celestia bristled but did not otherwise respond. She took a few steps back as she saw the lead pegasi begin to beat their wings.

Celestia shook her head one last time. "Just be careful," she said finally.

Shane racked the charging handle on his rifle. "You're careful enough for the both of us, Princess." Shane winked at the alicorn and set the barrel of the weapon over the edge of the carriage. He

held up his music player in his free hand and cranked the volume to its highest setting. And an obnoxiously loud electric guitar began to fill the air. Sandy clapped her hooves over her ears. A few of the pegasi guards grinned as they turned to identify the music, only to see the human throw his pinkie and index finger toward the sky.

The carriage pulled away and off the ground, over the edge of the mountain, followed by the first transport then another. The sound of Shane's music carried over the thin morning air as the convoy left in a neat South-westerly direction.

***~It's criminal! There ought to be a law! Criminal! There ought to be a whole lot more! You get nothin' for nothin'!***

Celestia watched as the last ship pulled off. Wondering, not for the first time that day, if she was making a mistake. She would have to come up with something to tell the press. She shifted the human's radio under her wing as she turned back toward the castle listening to the last remnants of the music dying on the wind.

***~Tell me who can you trust? We got what you want! And you got the lust!  
If you want blood... You got it!***

~~~~~

. The adrenaline from their trip had worn off hours ago. Sandy took another step and waited. For the millionth time that day. She eyeballed the ground beneath her hooves. Dirt...grass...sometimes a flower....maybe a tree root. Nothing.

The human in front of her was likewise stopped. His eyes weren't visible behind the polarized shades but the slow swivel of his head gave away the pattern of his scan.

He took another step, and the long line of ponies to his left and right did the same. Five miles didn't seem like much until you covered it like this. Like the world's slowest wedding march. Step...scan...scan...scan again...step. Her only comfort being that there were three other teams like theirs both covering ground. They had embedded themselves with Saber team because the human said

he thought it was the coolest call sign out of all four teams. He would occasionally talk to the headset, receiving information from the other three teams. Although she could only hear one end of the conversation it didn't sound like they had found anything either.

The earth pony mare in the human's personal detail hadn't said anything yet. Sandy wasn't even sure what her name was. She was taller and slim for an earth pony. Although her armor concealed the color of her coat and mane her eyes were some of the greenest Sandy had ever seen. The two pegasi the Major had selected were back at the rudimentary camp they established in a clearing next to the eastern side of the search area. Their vital task was to ensure no one touched the human's stuff.

The ground rushed up to meet her as she tripped over an exposed root and she released a pained squeal.

The human turned on the unicorn and gave her an irritated glare. He didn't say anything but she knew what he wanted to say. "*Be quiet and pay attention to what you're doing*". Sandy fixed herself. This was miserable. It was hot and her armor was heavy and she had been staring at dirt for the entire day. She knew better than to complain out loud of course. But still.

She could see the human sweating as well. Every now and then a droplet would collect on his nose, which he would blow off. A habit which she found funny but couldn't really ascertain why. He took another step. His rifle cradled in his arms as he scanned the ground in front of him.

Sandy did the same, a flash of movement in the distance catching her attention. She narrowed her eyes at the underbrush. Maybe she had imagined it. She waited. She was about ready to move along when she saw it again.

"Major," she said as loudly as she dared. The human turned and saw that she was frozen in place a few steps back. She pointed toward the underbrush with a hoof. "There's something out there."

Shane frowned and twisted toward where she pointed. He was frozen for several seconds before he puckered his lips and mimicked

a bird-call. Motioning for the ponies of Saber team to lay on their stomachs with their heads down until he told them otherwise, he done so several times, the ponies were becoming accustomed to it. .

Shane took a knee looked in the direction she was pointing. "I don't see anything." he noted after a moment.

"Wait," she whispered. "There!"

There was indeed a flash of movement. Something brown moving around maybe a hundred yards out. Shane stiffened, swinging his rifle to bear. He peeped through a short telescopic sight mounted on the weapon for several seconds.

"It's a deer!" he whispered excitedly. "A little buck." Sandy visibly relaxed. Shane wrapped his hand up in his sling and flipped the safety off his weapon, nuzzling his cheek into the butstock.. "Hold your ears I'm gonna shoot it."

Sandy started to reach up to hold her ears before it dawned on her. "Wait... Shoot it!? What!? WHY?!" she asked horrified.

Shane took his finger off the trigger, cocking his head to look at her with a perfectly serious expression. "Food."

Sandy had to physically resist getting sick. "You're joking," Shane raised an eyebrow. "You're not joking." She couldn't believe she was going to have to explain to this creature why he couldn't kill butcher and eat another living thing. How do you even communicate something like that?

"Don't tell me they're smart too." Shane frowned. "Are they sentient? Like... you guys?" He gestured toward the ponies in general.

"Yes!" Sandy exclaimed.

Shane harumfied safetying his weapon. "Figures. God I am so sick of god damn vegetarian shit."

"You eat *deer* though?" she was still trying to wrap her head around the idea.

Shane stood. "Deers good eatin'. I was born in Kentucky, sister. Deer hunting was practically all we had. Other than bourbon, tobacco, and horse racing. That's pretty much about it." He pressed the button on his headset. "Raptor this is Atlas." He waited a moment for the response that Sandy couldn't hear. He pulled a small map from his pocket. "We got contact at grid... break..." he squinted at the map. "Eight Niner Seven, Zero Two Six. One foot-mobile. deer, male, believed non-combatant. Head this way and give us fly-over see if this dudes alone" He paused again. "Atlas out."

It was several moments of painful silence as they waited. Shane continued to watch the buck through his rifle scope. "I thought you said this place was uninhabited."

"It's uninhabited in that no one is living here. Doesn't mean that no one is here at all. There's a small population of deer that live in a village a few miles west of here. They tend to be a bit more...*outdoorsy* than most ponies, but they usually stick to themselves." Sandy explained hoping she wasn't coming off as racist. "Their culture is just more focused on adapting to their environment rather than the other way around. They mostly tend to avoid major cities."

Shane didn't look over at the mare. "Are you seriously trying to tell me that deer are the elves of pony world?" he deadpanned.

"I don't know what elves are," she shrugged.

"Send it," Shane said into his radio, pausing to listen. "Roger, tango. I'm gonna push up and see what he's doing. Stay up there and circle for a bit, keep an eye out."

~~~~~

. Yellow Jacket adopted a lazy figure eight over the human's current position. She could see the ponies of Saber Team stretched out to his left and right. The foliage obscured her view somewhat but from her vantage she could see enough to get a good idea of what was below.

There was indeed a single deer wandering around. Young buck by the looks of him, poor kid was probably just out picking blackberries or something. Wrong place, wrong time.

“Raptor, Atlas”

“Raptor. Go.”

*“We’re cutting him loose, kid’s scared shitless. Say’s he promises he’ll head straight home. Keep an eye on him make sure he gets out of our AO.”*

“Roger, we got him.”

The human didn’t respond but she saw the buck take off in the other direction. She swore. Those deer could really move. She formed up her flight as they prepared to follow the young creature. When she noticed a splotch of black in the sky. A lone griffon was sitting on a small cloud watching them about a thousand feet above.

She pointed at the rapidly retreating buck. “Sunny, Misty, follow him and make sure that kid gets out alright. The two pegasi saluted before zipping off after the deer. She looked back up at the griffon. A jet black hen from what she could tell although at this distance it was difficult to be sure. Just watching them from her high perch.

“Atlas this is Raptor,”

“Send it.”

“I have eyes on a griffon sitting at about a thousand feet due North observing your position,”

There was a long pause. “*I thought you cleared the skies,*” he noted clearly irritated.

“We did, sir. She must have slipped in in-between patrols.”

“*She?*”

“From what I can tell, yes sir.”

*"I can't see this thing from down here. Get rid of her. Question her if you can. But get rid of her."*

"Roger," Yellow Jacket banked her wings toward the griffon's cloud as she gained altitude. She hadn't made it a hundred feet before the griffon dropped from her cloud and shot away like a dart. Jacket squinted at the retreating griffon suspiciously. "Atlas, she bolted as soon as she saw us."

*"Forget her. We don't have time to chase strays. Head back to the rear the sun's going to go down soon. We're wrapping it up for today."*

"Roger." she replied, unable to get the uneasy feeling out of her gut. She relayed the human's orders to her squad. She banked back toward their small encampment. Eager to get started on counting things so that they could go to sleep.

~~~~~

. A nightmare tore Yellow Jacket from her sleep, blinking and sitting up before remembering why she was sleeping in the middle of a dark forest. She laid back down and took several measured breaths, trying to calm her hammering heart. She watched the waning crescent moon through the trees. There was likely a few hours until sunrise but despite her busy day she couldn't seem to get back to sleep. Groaning in frustration she kicked off her blankets and clambered out of her bedroll and began to stretch.

A faint smokey smell wafted along the nightly breeze. She looked around to identify it she saw only sleeping legionnaires. A small orange dot gave away the silhouetted human who was sitting in the dark of a nearby oak, rifle across his lap and a smoldering cigarettes burning between his fingers. He occasionally brought it to his lips, and would exhale twin jets of smoke from his nose.

She once again looked around. The mare next to her let out an unconscious snore. The pegasus looked back at the human who was still watching her from the shadow of the oak tree. There was no avoiding it she supposed as she began to make her way over towards where he sat.



“Bad dream?” he asked as soon as she was close enough to hear.

“N-No, Sir. I just...couldn't seem to get back to sleep,” she lied.

The human hummed in response but nothing more.

“What about you, sir? Are you not tired,” she ventured.

Shane took a drag from his cigarette. “Yellow Jacket right?”

“Y-Yes, sir.” she answered, straightening her posture.

The corner of his mouth lifted. “At ease...” he soothed. “Do you have a rank Miss Jacket?”

“I'm an auxiliary, sir. So ...no not really.”

“Auxiliary?”

She nodded. “Most Pegasi are. Not all of them, of course. But if they were recruited out of Cloudsdale they probably came from the Royal Flight Academy. Students that graduate receive one of the most prestigious educations in the world but are required to serve a three year contract after graduation. After their three years they're offered a new contract with an official Legion position.”

“Kinda like the Naval Academy?” he asked.

“The Royal Navy has its own academy but yes I suppose it's somewhat similar.”

Shane hummed again. “How long you been in?”

“Three years and a few months. I'm on a temporary contract extension. I haven't been offered a Legion position yet,” she admitted somewhat embarrassedly.

“You gonna re-enlist?”

“That's just it, my contract is under review. They're deciding if they want to retain me or not.”

“How's it looking?”

“Not well...” she admitted. “There’s somewhat of a black mark on my service record that’s making it difficult.”

Shane cocked an eyebrow. “What did you do?”

“A few years ago I got into an...*altercation* with my section leader. And infighting isn’t very well tolerated.”

“What...you punched your staff nco in the face?” he asked grinning.

“In so many words,” she nodded.

The human’s laugh was deep and rumbling and the mare was thankful it was dark, and the alien likely couldn’t see the dark red blush on her face. “Tell me he at least deserve it?”

“I sure think so.*She* got caught harassing one of the new stallions, but her daddy was a well-connected noble so she got off with a slap on the hoof.”

“Good.” the human patted the grass next to him, inviting the pony to sit with him. “You know what I think?” She sat next to the biped curling her tail around herself. “If the pony military had a couple more ponies like you in charge it might be in danger of being somewhat respectable.” The human reached behind the tree and pulled out a half-empty bottle filled with dark maroon liquid. He took several measured drafts from the bottle before offering it to the pegasus.

She gave the creature a dubious look. “I won’t tell if you don’t tell,” he promised with a grin. She smiled accepting the bottle in her hooves.

The pony winced at the sweet tart bite of the crystal brandy, but the warmth the blossomed from her belly steadied her nerves and kept the nightly chill at bay. “May I ask you a question, sir?”

The human took a long drag from his cigarette, but motioned with his free hand as if to encourage her to speak.

“What are we really doing out here?”

Shane smiled as he slowly blew the smoke out of his lungs. "Looking for a way to send me home," he answered plainly. "The Princesses and had reason to believe there was something here that would make that possible."

"But there's nothing out here. We've been out here for two days and haven't found a thing."

Shane's smile fell a little. "No. We haven't," he agreed somberly.

Yellow Jacket suddenly realized what that meant for the human. She winced at how needlessly cruel it must have sounded. "I didn't mean it like... I mean-"

"It's okay," his assured calmly. "I don't really expect to find anything. I think Celestia is only letting me do all this because she's too nice to say its a waste of time to my face."

"Still..." Jacket continued. "I'm sorry."

"Can I ask you a question now?" Shane leaned forward eyeballing the mare critically.

"Umm...sure." she answered, feeling suddenly vulnerable under the human's gaze.

"Do pegasus ponies lay eggs?"

~~~~~

. Shane hopped off his carriage before it came to a stop. A stallion with an eagle emblazoned on his steel breastplate trotted over to greet him. He was the Centurion currently commanding Razor Team. The stallion offered the human a salute.

"Put that down. Where is it?" The human did his best to sound calm but the stallion could hear the charge underlying his words. The human was anxious, maybe even nervous, the stallion couldn't say for certain.

The Centurion turned and motioned for the human to follow. "This way, they've cordoned off the area and are waiting on you right

now.” One of his legionaries reportedly found an object lodged in the ground during their search. “What is it?”

The Centurion shook his head as they walked. “I haven’t seen it. When they called it in I ordered everypony to stay back until you arrived.”

The two crested the treeline where a few armored ponies were milling about. “Which one of you found it?” the human asked the collected equines.

One unicorn pony raised his hoof. “I did, sir.”

“Where?”

The pony pointed directly at a small cluster of saplings some fifty yards away. “Right in there, sticking out of the ground.”

Shane squinted at the cluster of trees and pointed raising an eyebrow at the pony as if to request affirmation. The pony nodded.

“Wait here,” he said as he began to trek, slowly but steadily, toward the indicated spot with his rifle cradled readily in his arms.

The equines waited with anticipation as the human reached his destination. He eyeballed the ground for several moments, nudging some sticks and leaves around with his boot. He turned back toward the ponies throwing up a confused hand. “Where?”

“It should be right near your feet, sir!” the pony hollered back.

Shane did another quick spin and kicked a few more stock and rocks around before throwing his hand up. “Come here!” he ordered.

The stallion gulped and began to trot toward the biped.

“Show me,” the human ordered when he was within speaking distance.

The pony cantered to the side of one of the saplings. Shane sidled up next to the stallion who was pointing his hoof at a small

glittering object pointing out of the ground.

Shane looked at the object... then back at the pony pointing at it. He frowned. "What's your name?"

"O-Onyx," he stammered somewhat taken off guard. "Onyx Bloom."

"What's your rank?" Shane asked as he slung his rifle on his back out of the way.

"Private, sir."

Shane nodded and knelt on the ground pulling the object out of the dirt and brushing some of the soil off. He held it out to the pony. "What's that look like to you, Private Onyx?" his tone was menacingly condescending.

"....It's....a Sarsaparilla bottle, sir..." beads of sweat began collecting on the equine's face.

"Mmmhmm," the human agreed. "Why did you call me out here for a sarsaparilla bottle, Private?"

"You said...to call you if anything was out of the ordinary."

"You think a bottle on the ground is out of the ordinary..."

"Well...I mean...how did it get there though?"

"I don't FUCKING-" Shane snapped his mouth shut as he saw the stallion tuck his ears back and cower at the outburst.. He took a deep breath. "I don't care how it got here, Private. It's not-" Shane stopped himself again and grimaced as he compulsively tapped the glass bottle against his palm for a painfully long time. "This is my fault," he nodded finally. "I was not specific enough." Onyx wasn't sure if the human was talking to himself or if he expected a response. "This is not what we are looking for. I am talking about things that you do not recognize. Machines, devices, objects you can not identify and do not look like they were made by ponies. I am not looking for litter. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

“Don’t be sorry,” Shane responded as he turned to leave. “I don’t blame you. I blame your recruiter.”

The human left Onyx behind, passing the ponies who were still waiting on the perimeter of the treeline.

The Centurion approached the human. “What happened? What was it?”

Shane tossed the bottle to the stallion who barely caught it. Turning the glass piece of refuse around in confusion. Shane walked passed the Centurion and back to his transport, leaving the rest of Razor team behind as well.

~~~~~

. It was roughly noon on the third day. Sandy was certain she had trekked every inch of this forest. Saber and Prophet team had met somewhere near the southern edge of the search area. Shane and the pegasus mare in charge of Prophet were kneeling in the center of a clearing along with a few other pegasi auxiliaries and a elder doe from the nearby village.

Shane traced a strange burnt pattern in the grass with his boots. It looked much like a lightning strike. Charred grass line streaked away from a blackened center in an erratic but controlled pattern.

“Ask her if these are common here.” he ordered the centurion, as he fingered the burned ground. The centurion relayed his command to the aging deer in broken Cervidea. She replied with foreign but musical words.

“She says, not common but not unheard of. The Equestrians don’t monitor the weather as closely this far from their cities and sometimes thunderstorms roll down from the mountain.”

Shane stood brushing the soot from his hands. “Ask her if any deer have reported seeing anything unusual.”

The centurion relayed his words. The doe smiled and replied.

“She says only that a young buck reported a two legged demon

haunting the woods around her village.”

Shane sniffed in amusement smiling at the deer. “We’ll have to be sure to keep our eyes out for that now won’t we?”

The centurion relayed his words and the older deer laughed as well. She stepped toward the human. She was taller than any pony but still quite small compared to the human who looked down at her with confused amusement. The doe grinned and reached up to poke the human on the armored plate protecting his chest. She said something in her native tongue.

“What did she say?” He asked not breaking eye contact with the doe.

“Something like... those who look for fights usually find one,” the centurion translated as best she could.

Shane hummed and he and the deer stared at each other for a few seconds. “Tell her thank you for her assistance. Offer to take her home in my transport.”

The centurion replayed his message. The elder deer shook her head and replied as she inclined her head to the human.

“She said she prefers to walk. And she hoped you find what you’re looking for.”

Shane smiled and inclined his head back. The deer turned and with a flick of the tail for which the forest got its name, pranced away. Despite her age she was surprisingly spry. Shane watched her leave before his smile began to fade. “Fuck now I’m hungry.” He complained.

“You want some of my ration?” the centurion offered.

“No I want *meat*!” he whined “I’m losing my mind with all these delicious animals running around.” Shane stepped around the burn marks in the grass as he pulled his small music playing device from his pocket. He fiddled with it for a moment before he held it in front of him using it to capture images of the ground from a few different angles. “When was the last lightning storm?” he finally

asked.

“In Canterlot? About a week ago. The same storm probably blew east and did this but I can’t say for sure. I haven’t seen the weather schedule recently enough to say for certain,” she answered.

Shane made his way back to his carriage, unbuckling the chin strap on his helmet. He tossed the kevlar bucket into the back where it landed with a clatter. Shane leaned against the vehicle with a long defeated sigh as he massaged his head and eyes with his hands. He muttered something as the centurion approached.

“Sir?” she asked uncertain if she were being addressed.

“I said there’s nothing out here...” he admitted sounding thoroughly defeated. “I have to go back tonight and I’m empty handed. There’s nothing here,” he repeated.

“Isn’t that a good thing, sir?” she ventured.

The human shrugged. “I don’t know. Good for you guys I suppose.”

“But not for you?”

The human rubbed the back of his head and sighed. He pushed himself up. “Sandy!” he shouted.

The beige mare perked up from where she was sitting. “Sir?!”

“We’re moving! Get in or get left behind.” Shane jumped up into the transport. His unicorn escort lept in after him just in time for the carriage to begin to move.

~~~~~

. “*Bluebird this is Atlas...*” Celestia’s ears perked up as she heard the radio headset on her desk begin to speak. Shane had ensured that their radio would be on a different frequency than the one there were using in Whitetail Wood so for the past few days the device had not made much noise. She replaced the quill in its stopper and lifted the radio to her head. She pressed the button on the side. “Hello?”



There was a noted pause. "...*Celestia?*"

Celestia smiled at the human's tone. "You were expecting somepony else?"

*"I thought you'd be asleep."* he explained. *"Where's Luna"*

"Who is Bluebird? Did you give Luna a callsign?" Celestia bristled. "Why didn't I get a callsign?!"

*"You have a callsign..."*

"You never told me I had a call sign," she protested.

*"I didn't plan on talking to you."* he retorted hotly.

"Well you are now," she said expectantly.

*"...It's Buzzkill."*

"That is NOT my callsign. You will think of a new one this very instant. I am not a buzzkill and Bluebird for Luna isn't even clever."

*"Are you really doing this right now?"*

"Give me a new callsign."

*"Will you please just go get Luna..."*

"I would love to but I don't know who you're addressing because I haven't heard you use my new callsign yet."

*"How about Giant Immortal Baby,"*

"And this 'immortal baby' has the luxury of time, mortal. You do not." she retorted.

The pause was longer this time and Celestia waited patiently.

*"....Phoenix this is Atlas,"* he finally said in a very tired voice.

Celestia perked up. "Acceptable. What can I do for you, Major?"

*"I'm heading back soon. Are you gonna be awake much longer?"*

"I wasn't planning to be, do you need me for something?"

*"Not really. I was just wondering who'd be there when I got back."*

"Luna will be here to meet you. I am going to sleep. While you were off playing in the woods, I've been busy fending off droves of scientists, reporters and politicians trying to get a piece of you."

*"You're the one who wanted to go public," the human pointed out. "I was perfectly content to die in the crater."*

"Yes, well be prepared to face the horde tomorrow. Twilight and several other academy mages have been gathering materials to begin studying your resistance to magic. And Cadance has been asking about you almost incessantly."

*"Wait, why?"*

"She hasn't said but it must be important. She seems troubled by something. Oh!" Celestia exclaimed, suddenly remembering. "You received a letter."

*"I didn't realize I had a mailing address. Who's it from?"*

"It's marked with the Griffon Royal Seal. I have to assume it's from the Queen." The alicorn lifted the sealed letter in her magic turning it around.

The human was silent.

Celestia was unsure if he had received her transmission.

*"...Major? ...Are you there?"*

*"...Yeah I'm still here,"* he answered after a short pause.

"You're being fairly quiet," she noticed. "Are you alright?"

*"I'm just tired."*

"Did you find anything in your search?"

“...no.”

Celestia frowned. She didn't really expect him to but still. It must sting to have every chance at rescue shot down in front of your eyes over and over. “I'm sorry, Shane.”

“Yeah,”

Celestia was unaccustomed to speaking to someone she couldn't see. Shane's species was difficult enough to read visual cues off of as it was. But he didn't have to be a pony for her to know that his ears would be folded back right now. She smiled encouragingly even though he couldn't see it. “Let the legion finish up the search, Major. Luna and I need your help back here. Come on home.”

Shane hummed over the radio “*And Canterlot is supposed to be my home now?*”

Celestia's smile widened. “Sorry. Was that a poor choice of words?”

“*I'm pretty sure you're not the type to choose words at random.*”

Celestia chuckled. “Well?”

There was another uncharacteristic pause over the radio.

“*...I'm on my way.*”

# ARTICLE 2 Part XX

## ARTICLE 2

### Part XX

Luna closed her eyes, a patient smile on her face as the cool night breeze drifted across the empty field. The stars were out and a tasteful crescent moon cast the courtyard in silver shadows.

Her ears swiveled toward the distant sounds of pegasus wings. A few moments later a heavy chariot landed a dozen yards away. She lazily opened her eyes as the transport came to a slow stop directly in front of the dark alicorn. Two pegasi pulled the cart. Shane, a small unicorn, and an earth pony shared the transport. The human was sitting on his pack, his helmet dutifully between his boots and his rifle across his lap. Shane blew an angry jet of smoke from the corner of his mouth before regarding the alicorn with a tired smile. "Hey, Blue."

Luna smiled back. "Hello, Major. Right on time," she commended.

Shane's smile fell a bit. He looked around the darkened field and let his shoulders slump under the weight of his armor. "Yaaay," he droned.

Luna's own smile faltered somewhat. "Your hunt was unsuccessful," it wasn't a question but she posed it like one.

Shane sighed and rubbed the back of his head. "You could say that."

"Did you find nothing at all?"

"Found an old coke bottle," he muttered.

"...*coke* bottle?" she asked confused.

Shane shook his head, remembering to alter his words for the ponies. "An old glass bottle," he explained. "Garbage." The human

flicked the cigarette off into the dark. “Met some of the natives,” he added.

“Oh? Whitetails?” Luna asked.

The human hummed an affirmative.

The unicorn in Shane’s escort spoke up. “He tried to kill and e-HMM!”

Shane clamped his hand over the mare’s muzzle like a viper. Shooting the equine an equally venomous glare. “What happens to snitches, Sandy?”

The unicorn pinned her ears back and recited something from behind the human’s hand that Luna couldn’t make out.

“That’s right. I’m gonna let go of your face now and **no more words** are gonna come out of it. Right?”

The unicorn nodded.

Shane released the pony and returned his attention to the dark princess who was leveling at him her most unamused look. Luna shifted her gaze to the unicorn mare. Sandy averted her eyes and did her best to turn invisible. Luna sighed and rolled her eyes. “I think I am happier not knowing,” she relented.

Shane smiled. “You’re smarter than you look, Princess,” he winked at the alicorn. He rolled to his feet and hefted threw his gear over his shoulder. He turned to the ponies in his entourage. “I’m done with you four. Go back to the AO, and find Yellow Jacket. Tell her I’m giving her operational command and that she is officially in charge of *every* swingin’ dick out there, whether she likes it or not. If the Centurions have a problem with it, tell them to call me.”

Sandy cast an uncertain glance toward the green-eyed earth pony in the carriage. She shrugged in response. Sandy turned back to the human and delivered a sharp salute. The stallions began to beat their wings as the chariot lurched forward. After several yards the transport was in the air and began sailing South-west into the darkened sky.

Shane and Luna watched the ponies leave for several moments before he turned to the alicorn. "Well... I'm back..."

Luna nodded. "Indeed."

Shane sniffed at the awkward silence. "So what now?" he asked. "You all seemed pretty adamant that I be back on time," he frowned expectantly.

"I have nothing for you to do. My court is adjourned for the night. I assumed you would want to get some sleep. You have had a busy weekend."

"I'm not really tired," he complained, scratching his chin.

"What would you prefer to do?"

"Wanna go get fucked up?"

Luna scoffed, and regarded the creature with amusement. "We shall pass, this time. But you are welcome to accompany us to our chambers if you are in need of company. We have some paperwork to catch up on."

The human sniffed and wiped his nose. "Alright," he shrugged.

~~~~~

Luna pushed a small pair of spectacles up on her nose and she squinted at the small print on the parchment in front of her. She levitated the quill up with her magic and crossed out a line and began to re-write.

She cleared her throat. "How about this," she shouted toward the bathroom. "The Equestrian Department of Horticulture hereby doth recognize the Wild Blueberry Commission of the Northern Province of Equestria, in its right to impose a tax of two point five percent to henceforth be levied on proceeds from sales of all Blueberries gathered from the wild, as to incentivize the production of domestically grown agricultural businesses in the area."

"Take out the '*Doth*'," Shane shouted back from the bathroom

where he was currently lounging in the dark alicorn's massive bathtub as he scrubbed three days of sleeping in the dirt from his body. "Just say *hereby recognizes*. Its tax code. Not *Ye Olde Englishe Poetry*," he admonished.

Luna frowned. She thought it sounded fine the way it was. She debated with herself for a few seconds before scratching out the word with a little more force than was necessary. She could hear water splashing from her bathroom. The door was open but Shane was apparently still wearing his skivvy shorts as to prevent the princess from 'getting a free show' as he described it. She had yet to go in to verify this as the last time she walked in on his bathing he throw a boot at her head.

"Also why are you taxing people for eating blueberries that grow in the wild in the first place?" Shane asked. "Seems kinda fucked up."

"We are not taxing them for eating wild blueberries." Luna corrected. "We allowing a tax to be applied to businesses that SELL wild blueberries. It is a small tax and will help promote the struggling farming infrastructure in that area."

Shane made a dismissive grunting noise. She could hear the sound of water sloshing as the human extracted himself from the tub.

"Are you finished in there," she asked sipping from the glass of Crystal Brandy the human was kind enough to share.

"Yeah," he sighed. "I could sit in there all night but I'm starting to get prune," he complained from the other room.

Luna turned back toward her papers. "You like the water don't you?" It was clearly more of an observation than a question so the human didn't answer, instead busying himself doing whatever post-wash self care that humans did. Luna could only take educated guesses based on the sounds he was making.

There was a long silence before the human spoke up again. "Do ponies cut their hair?"

Luna frowned but didn't look up from her papers. She was unsure

how to interpret the question. Ponies were covered in fur head to hoof. Proper care of ones coat was an essential part of everyday life. She did her best to understand the curiosity from the human's perspective. "Are you trying to ask if mane stylists exist?"

"....yes." He answered uncertainty.

"Yes they exist," she replied. Before there was another short silence. "Why?"

"I need a haircut," he muttered. "It's getting long. Do you think Rarity can cut hair?"

"Why Rarity?" Luna asked setting her papers down.

She couldn't see the human shrug but she was sure he did. "She seems the type, I guess. Can she?"

"We do not know. You could ask her, I suppose. Although I'm sure One of mine or Celestia's groomers would be able to accommodate you," she offered as she finished off her glass and set it aside. There was a pleasant warmth in her stomach and the hint of a gentle buzz about her head.

Shane stepped out of the bathroom in a fresh set of desert trousers, skivvy shirt, and clean pair of black boot socks. His pistol belt and holster tucked under one arm and his blouse thrown over his shoulder. A small symbol was emblazoned on the left breast of his shirt. A blue diamond shape with a red number one. She assumed it was a unit or legion marking or something similar. She would ask about it later.

The human dropped his things on Luna's bed and grunted, popping several of his joints as he leaned down to pull on and lace his boots.

"You crackle like a burning log..." Luna noted with a smirk.

Shane snorted. "That would be my cartilage," he grunted. "Or lack thereof. Just one thing among many that I've sacrificed for my country..." He stood back up and interlocked his fingers above his head, stretching and popping several more bones in the process. "I could get used to having a royal bathroom though. I could swim



laps in that tub.”

Luna hummed in response, only half paying attention as she wrote another line on her parchment. Shane dragged a large cushion by Luna’s desk where he deposited himself with his bottle and handgun. The action did not go unnoticed by the alicorn. He began to pull his weapon apart using his old shirt to wipe off the smaller parts.

Luna let him be. He cleaned his weapons often, even when he had done so mere hours before. She suspected it was somewhat therapeutic or perhaps mechanical to it. Like how some ponies would knit or whittle to keep their hooves occupied.

They sat like this for some time. Luna continued to plow through her paperwork, occasionally pausing to eyeball the human from the corner of her eye. He would frequently pause his busywork to stare aimlessly into the fireplace, before catching himself and returning to his sidearm.

“What troubles you, Major?” Luna finally asked as she magically drifted her empty glass toward him.

Shane blinked and filled the alicorn’s levitating glass. “Nothing, just thinking.”

“About home?” she probed, pulling the now filled glass back to her desk.

“I guess,” he replied cryptically.

“What is it that thee misses most about it?” she asked as she took a long sip, hoping the question wasn’t overstepping any boundaries.

Shane didn’t seem to mind the question. He hummed contemplatively.

“Sex, probably.”

Luna choked a little on the brandy but managed not to spit.  
“What?”

Shane turned toward the alicorn perfectly serious. “You know...sex?” he made a crude finger-in-hole gesture with his hands as if explaining it to a simpleton.

“We know **what** sex is!” she glared. “We were just expecting you to say something like family or your friends.”

Shane made a noncommittal noise and returned his attention to wiping off the last part of his weapon. “I feel like that kinda goes without saying.” He held up the barrel to the light looking for leftover dirt. “I’m allowed to miss other stuff too, ya know.”

“We we’re just not prepared for that answer,” she shuffled her wings back into place.

Shane cast a sideways smirk at the princess. “For a million year old lunar goddess you’re pretty easily to fluster. I’d have figured you’d been around the block once or twice.”

Luna’s wings lifted defensively “We are not *a million years old* and we are NOT *flustered*! And what do you mean by *around the block*?! ...art thou trying to imply that we are *easy*?!”

Shane threw his hands up innocently barely able to keep the grin off his face. “I’m just sayin’ a million years is a *long time*. I just assumed you’d be somewhat ...experienced ya know? Like I just kinda assume you... ya know ‘*seen some shit*’, right?”

“The things We have *seen* would drive most mortals mad, human.” Luna frowned threateningly.

Shane raised his hands once again. “Alright, calm down. I’m not tryna start anything. You’re very powerful and scary and I’m sure you’ve seen dark and terrible things,” he surrendered. Luna nodded and settled back into her chair. “Apparently none of those things were penises though...” he muttered.

Luna shot a bolt of electricity at the human who barely ducked in time. “ALRIGHT! FUCK! IT WAS A JOKE! Fucking chill! *God!*”

Luna harrumphed as she tossed her mane and shuffled her wings. She settled back behind her desk. “For someone apparently so

desperate to bed thou seem to make an extraordinary effort to be unlikable.”

Shane began to pick up the pieces of his gun and began to put them back together. “Desperate to what? Bed a pony?” he laughed.

“Yes... *Why not?*” Luna asked, very ready to be offended.

“Give me some credit. I’ve got some scraps of dignity left to lose before I start shagging the natives.”

“Oh, but you’re considering it?” Luna teased.

Shane laughed. “Luna, *honey*, I am a United States Marine. There are only ever two things on my mind. Sex or murder... Sometimes both,” he nodded. “And for the record, I *considered it* about ...twenty seconds after realizing I was gonna be stuck here forever and you all had vaginas.” Shane finally pieced his weapon together racking the slide satisfactorily and setting it on his lap and refilling his glass.

“Been peeking have you?” the alicorn teased.

“Yeah I have,” the human admitted a little too readily. “You don’t wear pants and clearly have a tenuous grasp on the concept of modesty. It’s hard to miss,” he explained as he sipped his drink. “Fortunately for you... I have not, as of yet, felt inclined to act or comment upon any of my keen observations.”

“How flattering that we meet thy lofty criteria of ‘*exists*’ and ‘*has vagina*’.” she drolled.

Shane pouted at the dark alicorn. “I think my standards are a wee bit higher than that...”

“Is that so?”

“I do also **generally** check for a pulse first,” he clarified loftily.

Luna scoffed. “Pig.”

Shane laughed and rolled to his feet. He moved over to Luna’s bed,

grabbing and wrapping his gun-belt back around his waist. "Don't you fret, Princess. Give it enough time and who knows? You just might get a shot at *aaall this*." He motioned up and down his person.

Luna huffed and rolled her eyes. "Lucky for me? You think very highly of yourself indeed, Major. "

Shane hummed and stretched. "Well if I didn't, no one would."

Luna laughed at that. "Is this truly your current state of mind, Major. Or are you just attempting to get a rise out of us."

Shane smiled back as he collapsed back into his cushion. "Little bit of both, I think?" He laced his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes. "I don't know why but I been thinkin' about weird shit recently," he confessed.

"Oh?" Luna encouraged as she returned her attention to her papers. "Are you going to tell us? Or are you still referring to your newfound sexual confusion?"

He ignored the last bit. "It's nothing really, just random stupid thoughts that I never thought I'd have to think," he continued with a smirk "Like this has been bugging the hell out of me for days." He scratched his jaw thoughtfully. "The week before I left my house to go on this mission..." he began dreamily, his eyes still half closed. "My lawnmower broke. Gas was leaking out the carburetor, I texted my brother-in-law to see if he would mind looking at it since he and my sister were watching my house while I was gone." He opened his eyes and pursed his lips. "Never texted me back. Never found out what was wrong with it. Never will..."

Luna let him talk. She didn't really understand much of it. But could piece together the gist of what he was saying. He always got chatty like this when he drank. It, while amusing in its own right, never seemed to have a real point. He just wanted to talk for the sake of someone willing to listen. He obviously didn't have many ponies he could really relate to or confide in. She and Celestia were likely the closest things to friends or relatives he had now, and even then only by virtue of being the most familiar with his situation. It was a

tenuous relationship on its best day. Which is partially why she so valued moments like these.

"I guess it doesn't matter," he continued. "The mowers probably gone now, along with the house. My family probably sold all my stuff when I died."

"You didn't die, Major." Luna corrected.

"You know what I mean." Shane just waved a hand nonchalantly dismissing the correction before becoming quiet again. "The point I'm trying to lead into, is that I'm worried this place is starting to get to me," he stared at the ceiling uncomfortably. His sudden shift in tone grabbing the alicorns attention.

Luna looked at the human over the rim of her glasses. "How so?"

"Like... how long is it gonna be before I stop seeing people in my dreams and start seeing ponies?"

Luna froze set her papers down and began to listen very carefully. "Did you see a pony in one of your dreams, Major?" Luna did her best to keep her voice calm. It was most likely a natural dream.

Shane shrugged. "I'm just trying to think of an example," he deflected. "The point I'm trying to make is that I'm surprised by how quickly I'm becoming used to things like talking animals and magic." Luna frowned at being referred to as an animal but she managed not to interrupt. "I had friends in the Corps who immigrated from non-english speaking countries and enlisted for citizenship," he went on. "They all said the same thing, there'd be a moment where you start to dream in the new language."

"Do you think that's such a bad thing?" Luna asked quietly.

"I don't know," he answered softly. "The way they always described it made it seem kinda bittersweet. I think I get why."

"Because it seems like you are losing a part of yourself through assimilation?"

"I guess," he shrugged. "It's not like I think I'm gonna forget what

it's like being human," he clarified. "But ...at some point I'm probably gonna forget some of the small stuff. I wonder how long it will be before I forget about my lawnmower. Or if I'll ever catch myself using words like 'somepony'. And... I don't know just weird thoughts like that have been in my head." His words drifted off.

Luna pondered for several moments. "I am sure to some degree it is all inevitable. I think just by nature of being aware of it you'll be able to mitigate its effects. My suggestion to you would be not to try *too hard* to fight it. Guard your core values jealousy but time will wear on your memory. That is unavoidable. I have lost countless memories to time, Major," she consoled. "Old records and stories do them little justice. I occasionally hear mention of myself in historical texts and forget the mere they are referring to is me. But certain memories will never leave me," she reversed. "Some even thousands of years ago. Ancient history by any right, yet I could still close my eyes and see them. As if it were only this morning."

She closed her own eyes for a moment before opening them and looking at Shane who was watching her with an easy smile.

"I have found that it is not your memories that shape who you are," she explained. "Your experiences have already shaped you. The significant ones will be retained. Like a river may not recall every single rainstorm that forged it. But the river knows what its path is, and pushes forward regardless." Luna removed her glasses. "An imperfect analogy, but do you understand what we are trying to say?"

"That we are more than the sum of our parts?" Shane ventured a guess.

"I suppose that would be a succinct way of putting it," she noted. "My point simply being that I would not let it trouble you overly so. It is a natural part of life and an unavoidable by-product of age."

Shane hummed, apparently satisfied with her response as he turned toward the fire to ponder her words. Luna slowly sank back into her work as the quiet grew between them. The crackle of the fire and rustling of parchment the only sound for several moments.

“What did the Griffons want?” Shane asked suddenly. “Celestia said I got a letter.”

“You did,” she confirmed. “Would you like to read it?”

“I assume you already have, so I’d prefer the short version.”

Luna thought for a moment. “It was an invitation. From the Queen herself. It arrived shortly after Magneus sent his report back home. Which is unusual in of itself if you were to ask us.”

“Why is that unusual?”

“It arrived two days ago. Your formal public reveal was only three. Which means the invitation was likely drafted and sent before then, meaning she already knew about you.”

“Interesting,” he sounded amused. “What’s her name?”

“The griffon Queen?” the human nodded. “*Almandine*. Almandine Gelana. She inherited the throne after the untimely passing of her father Carnelian a little less than a decade ago.”

“Let me guess, she’s struggling to fill daddy’s shoes?”

“Quite the contrary actually,” Luna corrected. “She’s proven to be quite capable. Not terribly surprising really. She’d been groomed for the throne since birth. I think you’d like her. She’s a very direct, no-nonsense, type. Not one for the touchy-feely or fainthearted. Smart as a whip and very witty. I think you would get on well with her.”

“Should I go?”

“What?” Luna paused uncertainly.

“You think I shouldn’t?”

Luna opened her mouth but didn’t speak for a few seconds. “You can if you wish. We were not lying when we said you are not a prisoner here. Truthfully though I didn’t think you would want to. I had already begun drafting a polite declination.”

“Political intrigue isn’t exactly my strong suit. Would refusing cause you all a lot of trouble?”

Luna scoffed. “We appreciate the sentiment, Major. But you could not blow your nose without causing us trouble. We can make the arrangements if you really wish to go, but it may be some weeks and perhaps some.” Luna considered her choice of words. “...education of local etiquette before we could schedule this trip. We must discuss it with Celestia first. I hope you understand.”

“Sure,” Shane nodded understandingly and rolled to his feet. Stretching one final time. “I think that’s it for me, Princess.”

“Goodnight, Major. Sleep well. Twilight will be at your room in a few hours. She has a few more magic tests we would like to run. They shouldn’t take long.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Shane gathered his things and made for the door.

“Major?” Luna asked with a wry smile. The human paused and cocked his head at the lunar alicorn. “Have we ever appeared in your dreams?”

Shane scoffed and shot the princess a cocky grin. “Why? Would you like to?”

“We are just curious,” she shrugged her wings.

“If I said ‘no’ would you be disappointed?”

“On principle? Somewhat I suppose,” she admitted with a grin of her own.

“Not that you wouldn’t be welcome,” he laughed. “...but you may be less flattered by what you see than you’d think,” he added.

Luna shook her head. “We shall keep that in mind, Major.” Luna promised. The human’s levity at the suggestion betraying his lack of true understanding of what he was indirectly agreeing to.

Shane laughed again and shook his head. “Goodnight, Luna.”



“Goodnight, Shane.” Luna smiled sweetly. After all permission was permission. Ill gotten or otherwise.

~~~~~

Cadance cast hesitant glances over her shoulder in the darkened room. She had no “real” reason to sneak. She was perfectly allowed to be here. However her sudden “appetites” may arouse suspicion and raise questions she was trying her best to avoid.

She winced as the harsh light of the massive refrigerator cast long shadows over the dark royal kitchen. Squinting she began to scan the shelves, for what she did not know. But the hormones flooding her senses demanded that she eat....*something*. She could quite put a hoof on what. Her horn sparked as she levitated out a carton of mint ice cream and several boxes of graham crackers. All semblances of dignity forgotten as the Empress forwent utensils and stuck her muzzle directly into the carton.

She levitated out a cracker and scooped some of the dairy treat onto the cinnamon wafer shoving the entire thing into her face. She chewed thoughtfully. “*This isn’t it...*” she thought to herself. That hunger in the pit of her stomach went unsated.

“Watcha’ doin’?” a bassy voice spoke into her ear.

She only screamed for a second as she clasped a hoof over her mouth and grabbed the closest kitchen utensil. She leveled her soup ladle at the voice as he poked his head into the light.

Shane blinked at the alicorn, cocking his head and eyeballing her ladle judgmentally. Cadance dropped the implement on a nearby counter falling back on her rear and clutching her hooves to her heart as she managed to catch her breath.

“What are you doing?!” She demanded as the enormous biped stepped into the glow of the refrigerator.

“I was going to bed. I saw the light on and got curious,” he explained simply.

Cadance relaxed somewhat. “Did you have to sneak up on me like

that?" Nothing his size had any right moving that quietly.

Shane frowned. "There wasn't much *sneaking* to it," he clarified. "Seems more like you were just too preoccupied having relations with the tub of Rocky-Road to notice."

"It's mint chocolate chip." She fired back, getting oddly defensive for no reason.

Shane let it slide, looking around the dark kitchen. "Unusual time for snack isn't it?" Shane leaned over the small pink alicorn, scanning the items in the fridge himself.

Cadance recoiled. "Do...do you really not remember the other night?" she was almost hopeful. "What we talked about? In your cell?"

Shane's face was blank for a second before he cast a glance back at the pink crystal empress with a smirk. "Ooooh, you started getting cravings." He teased the alicorn poking her in the side playfully. "Kid's not even here yet and you're already lettin it call the shots." Shane tsk'd.

Cadance blushed. "So you do remember."

"Of course I remember," he said sounding offended. He nudged the alicorn out of the way and began nosing his way through the contents of the refrigerator. He opened a small jar giving it an inquisitive sniff. He frowned and replaced it before selecting another jar. Opening it and apparently finding its contents much more satisfactory. "Here," he offered the alicorn the jar. "Try those."

Cadance took the jar from the human hesitantly. "Pickles?" she asked incredulously.

"Bread and Butter," he proffered. "Trust me," Shane said.

"I don't like pickles," she protested, levitating the jar back toward the human.

Shane pushed the jar back toward the alicorn. "Bet," he challenged.

“The ice cream didn’t help did it?”

“No...” she admitted.

“Try one,” he tempted.

The alicorn rolled her eyes. Levitating a small pickled spear from the jar, nibbling off the edge experimentally. It was soury sweet and vinegery. She had to admit it had a satisfying crunch. It was salty and she found herself licking her teeth as it slid down her gullet. She took another bite, this one larger. She swore to herself. This did hit the spot. She scarfed down the rest of the pickle and fished out another.

Shane smiled triumphantly.

“I suppose I have to give you that one,” she caved. “Since when did you become an expert on alicorn pregnancy?” Cadance asked as she crunched through another spear. “Or were you a midwife in a past life?”

Shane scoffed. “I’m a man of many talents, your Emperessness. Lookin’ good, and stackin’ bodies are just two of my more serviceable skills.” Shane picked a pickle out of the jar for himself. Leaning against the countertop as he crunched on it. “My sister got pickle cravings when she had her kid,” Shane yawned through the explanation. “You tell your dumbfuck husband yet?”

“I’m still waiting for the right moment...” she murmured ashamed.

“You keep waiting and he’s gonna get pretty suspicious when a baby pony falls out of you one day,” Shane teased.

Cadance blushed. “It’s just... what if he isn’t ready? What if I’m not ready? We can barely find time for each other now that we have an entire country to run. How are we gonna find time for the baby? How am I supposed to lead a nation *AND* be a good mom? What if they resent me for not giving them enough time? What if they think I care more about the Empire than them? Will my subjects think I’m shirking my duties?” she stopped herself, realizing she was unloading a lot of very personal baggage onto a total stranger.

The human didn't look like he minded. He was just smiling at the alicorn's outburst. "Been waiting to get that off your chest haven't you?"

"Yes..." she admitted. "I'm sorry. You're just the only one that knows..."

Shane shrugged dismissively. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure it's a hard thing to keep secret. You're making it harder on yourself than you need to though," he reminded. "You should probably tell someone who matters. Maybe start with the father of your child? He may be a stupid boot but he's your stupid boot. It's not right that you're hiding it from him."

"Do you have any foals?" she asked, the barest hint of hostility entering her voice at being lectured..

His smile fell away. "No," he admitted. "None that I know of at least," he corrected, flashing a ghost of a smile. "But I know a thing or two about dealing with personal shit and feeling like you have no one to talk to about it."

Cadance winced slightly. Maybe she was being self centered. She and Shining Armor had been blessed with the miracle of a child and all she could think about was how it would change their lives. The human had lost everything and he had no one. Yet here he was, offering her words of encouragement when in all reality it should be the other way around. Frankly she was somewhat embarrassed.

"I'm sorry. It must seem fairly rude of me to dump all of this on you. *You* of all ponies," she added. "I'm just... *scared*," she admitted, possibly more to herself than to the human.

Shane regarded the small pink Empress for several moments. "Well get *un-scared*," he advised plainly as he nudged the alicorn with his knee. "Cause that kid's coming whether you're scared or not." Shane looked at the band on his wrist, remembering the timekeeping device was still broken. "I'm going to bed." The human pushed himself away from the countertop and headed toward the door he came in. "Goodnight, Princess."

“Shane?” Cadance called before the human could make it out the door. Canance thought about how to properly phrase her request. “Will you...” she wasn’t sure what she was even asking for. “You’ll help me... right?”

He laughed. “You don’t want my help, Princess,” he assured her over his shoulder as he continued toward the exit. “And you don’t need it,” he added looking back at the pink alicorn. “Go back to bed, Princess. It’s late and you’re jacked up on baby hormones. He’s gonna wonder where you got off to. And if you *are* hell bent on keeping him in the dark you may wanna think of an excuse for the morning sickness comin’ your way.”

Shane disappeared through the doors and left the pink alicorn empress alone in the soft light of the refrigerator.

Cadance frowned, unable to help but feel like she had just received a scolding from her headmaster. She kicked the refrigerator shut. And headed for the exit.

~~~~~

Twilight nodded at the now familiar guards as she wandered the darkened dungeon halls on her way to Shane’s cell, preparing to ply the large creature with coffee in an attempt to coax him awake.

She didn’t need to. Shane was already awake and dressed. He was sitting on his cot back against the wall one leg cocked up on the other. He was absentmindedly playing with a large silver coin, attempting to get it to flip across his knuckles and back without dropping it.

He noticed the small lavender unicorn enter with a flick of his eyes. She offered the human a good morning but he didn’t answer. He tried once more to get his knuckles to carry the coin from one end of his hand to the other. There were bags under his eyes. He didn’t look like he’d gotten much sleep.

Twilight chewed the inside of her cheek, wondering if the human was in one of his ‘moods’. Shane dropped the coin, swearing softly to himself. He finally looked up and appraised Twilight. She said

something again.

Shane took the earbud out of his ear, Twilight could faintly hear music.

“What?”

“I said good morning,” she repeated, offering the human the coffee.

“What time is it?” he asked, thanking her for the drink.

“Early. The sun’s about to come up.” Shane made a noise that implied he understood. But otherwise seemed to zone out once again. “You lose track of the time?” she smiled gesturing at the wristwatch on his arm.

Shane seemed confused for a moment before realization washed over him. “It broken,” he tapped the timepiece sadly.

“Why are you still wearing it?”

“I mean the timer still works, and the stop-watch and stuff. It just isn’t keeping time anymore,” he defended somewhat sheepishly. “Honestly I’m just so used to wearing it.” he looked down at the black digital face of the watch contemplatively. The Casio logo had long since rubbed off. “Just feel naked without it I guess.”

Twilight frowned. “Have you been up all night?”

Shane shrugged. “I was up late talking to Luna. Just started thinking and never got around to sleeping.” His explanation seemed deliberately vague.

“What were you thinking about?”

“How old is Cadance?” he asked out of the blue.

Twilight was somewhat surprised by the question. “She’s a few years older than Shiny and you. Twenty-nine if I remember right.”

“Shiny and me?” Shane asked.

She nodded. "You two are the same age." Shane made a face at that but it faded quickly. "Why do you ask? Or are you saying you were up all night thinking about my brother's wife?" she prodded playfully.

"I was wondering if she could die. Or if she was like Luna and Celestia. She's an alicorn right?" Twilight's smile disappeared. It wasn't like the same thought hadn't crossed her mind before. "Does immortality come with the alicorn territory or vice versa?"

It wasn't a thought Twilight liked to ponder. She knew the idea made Cadance extremely uncomfortable. Immortality seemed like a terrible terrible blessing. Cadance was practically a sister to Twilight. She couldn't imagine having to watch everyone they loved grow old and die.

"We're not sure," Twilight finally spoke. "There hasn't been another known alicorn for over two thousand years. So far Cadance has aged normally. But according to Celestia, so did she for a time. She said she was about in her mid to late thirties when she stopped visibly aging."

"Does she talk about it a lot?" Shane asked quietly.

"I only ever asked her once. I was fairly young but one day it dawned on me that Cadance was an alicorn just like Princess Celestia. I put two and two together, and ran teary eyed to the Princess and begged her to tell me." Twilight sat on the padded floor and swished her tail a few times. "It seemed rude to intrude on something so personal but she didn't seem to mind. Or at least I don't think she did. It's hard to tell sometimes. Princess Celestia is a complicated mare."

Shane hummed as he contemplated Twilight's words while toying with the coin in his fingers.

"Pretty heavy topic for so early in the morning," Twilight noted, clearing her throat to break up the growing silence. Shane still didn't say anything. Twilight levitated her, steadily growing, human-book out of her saddlebag along with a quill. "I was hoping you could tell me a few more things about human society before we

have to be at the academy.”

Shane didn't seem to even hear her. She lowered the book uncertainly. “Unless you weren't feeling up to it.”

“Can we go to the library?” he asked suddenly.

Twilight perked up. “The library?”

“Somewhere I can find a book to learn about something?” he clarified.

Twilight gasped and beamed, causing the human to recoil. “Of course we can go to the library! We can go right now! Come on, I'll show you!”

The little unicorn shoved the floundering human off his cot and toward the door.

~~~~~

Celestia daintily wiped any traces of her breakfast off her muzzle with a napkin. Luna suppressed a yawn, clearly eager to get to bed. Celestia glanced over a few of the documents Raven had dropped off before her court had started.

“We had a thought last night,” Luna began.

Celestia set her documents aside, giving Luna all of her attention.

“We believe we may need to speak to Shane about his behavior in front of the public now that the world's eye is upon him.”

“All this time and you're *just now* having concerns about his behavior?” Celestia raised an eyebrow speculatively.

“That is not what we meant,” Luna frowned. “It merely occurred to us that his behavior while abrasive does not strike us as overly... *alien*.”

“Well he isn't technically speaking an alien,” Celestia noted. “He is from another dimension. It would be more accurate to say he is



from a drastically altered version of our own reality than it would be to say he is from another planet.”

“That is exactly our point,” Luna asserted. “If we are to promulgate the fiction that the human is indeed an alien, we feel it would be in our better interests if he acted a little more so. If it is discovered that he is a transdimensional creature we are worried it may reawaken ponies interest in attempting to open portals to his or other dimensions.”

Celestia contemplated her sisters words. “It seems unlikely that anypony would succeed. Ponies have been trying and failing at that endeavor for a millenia. But I see your point. I’ll discuss it with him.”

There were a series of knocks at the door before a onyx haired unicorn poked her head inside. “Um, your highness. I’m sorry to bother you but there a mare here from the library with an urgent matter that she insists needs your attention.”

“Can it wait, Raven? I am a bit preoccupied at the moment.”

“I’m so sorry, Princess but it’s the human,” Celestia frowned wondering what mess the biped had gotten himself tangled up in now.

“What seems to be the problem? He hasn’t harmed anyone has he?”

“Well no, he hasn’t but...” she paused, unsure how to address it.

“-but?” Celestia prompted.

~~~~~

The librarian was an elder unicorn. She had a dull cornflower coat with dull grey hair. Age had taken the luster out of her coat and mane. Her eyesight wasn’t what it used to be but a set of thick eyeglasses helped with that. One thing that had never deteriorated with age, she was proud to say, was her hearing. Although today she wasn’t quite sure if that too had finally failed her.

After the initial shock of seeing the alien from the newspaper walk

into the royal library wore off. She began working on puzzling out what he had said.

“T-terribly sorry, c-come again, dear?” she stuttered.

“I’m looking for a book on alicorns,” he said plainly.

That much she understood.

“Specifically their weaknesses.”

There it was.

The part she couldn’t quite wrap her horn around.

What did he mean by weaknesses? Celestia had a soft spot for cakes and pastries. Everypony knew that. Did he mean literal weaknesses?

“You’re asking for a book on alicorn *weaknesses*...” she repeated.

The human frowned, apparently becoming frustrated at having to repeat himself. “Yes.”

“I don’t think I have any books like that,” he furrowed her brow.

The creature seemed disappointed. “Is there like a *Forbidden Section* I could check in? Magic libraries always have Forbidden Sections.

“No I’m afraid there’s nothing forbidden here. The library is open to the public. Although it’s only staffed five days a week during business hours.”

“Do you have any books at all about alicorns? Like any history books about them being defeated and how that was accomplished in great detail?”

“You aren’t trying to hurt the princesses are you?”

“*Whaaat!*” he laughed. “Nooo! I’m just trying to learn how to kill them so I can avoid doing those things. Like you know... I don’t know anything about them and I don’t want accidentally kill them by doing something that I didn’t know would kill them.” He

nodded. “By accident of course.”

“And you’re asking about alicorns specifically because?”

“Becaauuuse...” he struggled for a few seconds. “Well they’re seemingly immortal, right?”

“Yes.”

“I already know how to not kill mortal creatures. And obviously the things that kill normal ponies haven’t killed them right? So it’s possible that things that don’t kill normal ponies MAY kill alicorns, right?”

“I suppose,” she admitted.

“Kinda like how Dorothy didn’t know the water would kill the witch in Wizard of Oz.”

“Wizard of what?”

“So if you have something, *anything* on alicorns. Like anatomy or history I would consider it a great help in furthering you know like, peace and stuff.”

“Anatomy will be in the medical section of the Life Sciences under A. History is its own section. If you’re looking for more information about the Princesses though I might suggest starting with a history of Equestria. The Princess’ history is Equestria’s history after all.”

The human nodded, seeming sufficiently satisfied with her answer. As soon as he was out of sight the mare hopped off her stool and ran to find the nearest guard.

~~~~~

“Did you find the librarian?” Twilight asked from her study table after the human returned with three books tucked under his arm.

“Yeah, she was useless,” he complained.

Twilight frowned. “What are you even looking for?”

“Something about alicorns,” he dragged a too-small chair over to sit by the small lavender unicorn. The light from a nearby window swelled as the sun cresting over the horizon. They had about an hour or two before she needed to have Shane at the academy.

Her frown deepened. “So what’s with the sudden curiosity?”

“The curiosity isn’t sudden,” he assured. “I’m just suddenly deciding to investigate it.”

Twilight shook her head, not particularly inclined to play the human’s word games. “Well whatever the reason is I don’t think you’ll find a whole lot outside of historical texts. Plenty of biographies have been written about the princesses though. What are you trying to learn anyway?”

“How to kill them, primarily,” he said thumbing open the first book in his pile.

“How to *what?!?*” Twilight growled.

“Oh come on,” Shane cast a sidelong glance at the unicorn. “You can’t seriously tell me you’re not curious. You all have a set of immortal undying rulers and not a one of you sees any issue with that?” Shane thumbed a few more pages in his book. It looked like a book on physiology. “You think she has like a Dorian Grey thing going on or is it more like vampire rules?” he asked out loud.

“You think Princess Celestia is a vampire?” Twilight repeated sardonically.

“Mmm, *not really*, Luna maybe. She seems more the type. Vaguely gothic, dark, you know the ones.” He waived in a generalizing motion.

“Neither of the Princesses are vampires,” Twilight shot down.

“We’ll see...” he replied, returning his attention to his book.

Twilight shook her head, not happy that Shane was trying to learn to kill the mare who was practically a second mother to her, but confident that he wouldn’t even if he figured out how. Celestia had

stood victorious over some of the most powerful and terrible foes that darkened the most desolate corners of Equus. If alicorns were so easily killed she wouldn't be here.

She pulled out her human book, deciding to take advantage of the short amount of free time they had left before reporting to the academy. "Will you finish telling me how internal combustion works?"

Shane sighed and shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not really a mechanic, Twi. I changed my own oil once and was so proud of myself I talked about it for like two years. Most cars are electric nowadays anyway."

"Will you try?" she pleaded with big-ass adorable eyes.

The human sight again. "Fine,"

Twilight beamed and dipped her quill in a small glass ink pot, tapping the nib a few times for good measure.

~~~~~

*\*Ting Ting Ting\**

Shane glared at the unicorn's quill from over the edge of his physiology book. Twilight's quill hadn't slowed for nearly twenty minutes. She tapped the nib on the corner of the pot after finishing another line.

The engine was simple conceptually but to make it all work in sync seemed an impossible mechanical task. Several pistons ran in their cylinders powered by small electric detonations of liquid or gaseous fuel which in turn turned a crankshaft which was connected to a camshaft and a timing belt, then the human's description had failed her. He had no real idea of how it worked beyond that. He could explain the basic function of the various mechanisms. He knew what a radiator or transmission did. But he clearly had no real idea HOW they did it.

*\* Ting Ting Ting\**

Twilight dipped her quill again tapping the nib on the glass. The human shot her another irritated glance. A drive shaft connected to a differential... She paused. She should probably draw a picture of that. It was difficult to put into written words.

She dipped her quill again, once more tapping the nib to remove excess ink.

*\*Ting Ting-\**

Like a viper Shane reached across the table and snatched the small glass inkpot away and unceremoniously threw it out the open window behind them. Twilight gaped “**Shane!** What in Eques-” she turned back around just in time to see him snap her good quill in half before dumping its limp corpse on the floor. “HEY!” she began irate at the sudden unwarranted violence against her writing implements. “What do you think-”

She was interrupted again Shane held something under her nose. She recoiled and saw he was offering her some sort of modified fountain pen. It was black and semi-clear plastic. The ink was contained in a long thin cylindrical container. Which could be retracted via a clicky button on the top.

Shane shook it under her nose, encouraging her to take it. She finally did. Fountain pens were expensive and rather inefficient, but this one didn't seem to leak or drip at all. She scribbled a little on the paper in front of her. It wrote smoothly and didn't bleed or scratch.

“Wow,” she finally said. All her anger forgotten. “This is a really nice pen.”

“A pack of ten is like five bucks at Office-Depot. Just keep it,” he finally said, returning to his book in silence.

Twilight was too busy being delighted to properly reply. She wouldn't have to constantly dip her quill or worry about smeared ink. At least until the internal cartridge ran out. She should patent this. Was that ethical? She wondered. To claim a human invention as her own? She flipped to a fresh page and began to sketch a

drawing of her new pen with the pen itself. She wondered if Shane had another she could give to a manufacturer as a sample.

“Catching up on some reading, Major?” Celestia approached their table from in-between a set of shelves. She didn’t look overly amused.

“Celestia! I’m glad you’re here actually. Tell me, how do you feel about garlic?”

“I’m quite fond of garlic, although it does tend to give me heartburn.” she answered without missing a beat.

“Huh,” Shane’s pondered. “If I steaked you through the heart would you die?”

“I suppose I would.” She looked over his small collection of books. “Anatomy?” Shame hummed an affirmative.

Celestia grinned. “I suppose it’s good you’re learning more about ponies. If you mixed up *withers* and *rump* with a less forgiving mare there may have been consequences.”

“What?” Twilight asked feeling appropriately lost.

“I touched Celestia’s butt because I didn’t know what withers were,” Shane said plainly.

Twilight giggled.

“Laugh it up,” Shane thumbed his nose. “At least now I can tell everyone I got to *pony second-base* with a Princess.”

“When I heard the human was in the Library trying to kill alicorns I was expecting something a little more grand than studious research,” she sighed.

“Did that fucking librarian snitch on me?!” the human shouted.

“Shhh!” Twilight admonished.

~~~~~

Shane frowned at Twilight, looking hesitantly at her glowing horn. Then at all the surrounding medical and magical experts packed into the lab.

“Are you sure there isn’t another way to test this?” He asked very uncomfortably.

“It’s perfectly safe, Shane. Go ahead.”

He shifted in his seat. “It’s not really safety that’s concerning me,” he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“What the issue then?” she asked impatiently.

“I don’t know,” he admitted “It just feels kind of... lewd.” He eyeballed the the glowing lavender horn on Twilight’s head.

A few of the pegasi or earth ponies in the lab began to stifle giggles, much to the indignation of the present unicorns. The running joke that the horn was an erogenous zone for unicorns apparently not losing its comedic effect even so many years after unification.

Twilight blushed slightly and shot Shane an irritated look. “It’s not *lewd*. Now shut up and touch my horn.”

“See, phrasing it like that doesn’t help...” he complained as he pinched his nose

Twilight groaned, “Will you just do it?”

Shane shook his head, mentally steeling himself as he wrapped his hand around the young mare’s glowing horn.

Twilight sucked in a short breath. As the magic flowing through here horn slowly retreated back into her. It wasn’t painful in any way but the sensation was certainly new. Magic simply retreated away from the contact like two opposing magnets. She knew she could never let the human hear her comparison lest it justify his use of magnetism to explain arcane energy, but in this particular scenario the analogy seemed fairly apt. .

“Can you increase the output?” One of the mares in a lab coat asked



Twilight.

Twilight's jaw tightened as she forced more energy through her horn. The retreating magic brightened and slowed, putting up more of a fight against the repelling effect of Shane's hand.

"Are you alright, Major?" the same mare asked.

The human nodded, but beads of sweat were collecting on his forehead.

"See if you can push it," she ordered Twilight.

The unicorn gritted her teeth as she channeled even more energy through her horn. The magic was now gaining ground towards Shane's hand. As soon as now near blinding purple energy made contact with the human's skin he hissed and pulled his upper lip back, with discomfort. The muscles and tendons in his arms doing their best to maintain contact.

The second Twilight's magic reached the tip of her horn, there was a sizzling sound and Shane yelped, ripping his hand away from the unicorn's horn.

Twilight, not expecting the resistance to suddenly vanish, inadvertently released a massive burst of magic sending a purple shockwave through the lab, shattering instruments and windows alike and knocking Shane clear off the table and several ponies off their hooves. The wave dissipated harmlessly against the walls.

"Is everypony alright?!" Twilight asked in a panic.

Shane laughed and pulled himself upright. "That's one way to wake a fella up." He shakily got to his feet shaking his hand while surveying the damage.. "Little backed up there, Twilight? Been awhile, has it?" He flexed his fingers wincing as small patches of new flesh were exposed to the air.

Twilight blushed. "That's not funny. You just surprised me."

Shane grinned, nudged one of the stallions with his knee. "You see that? Got that girl to shoot her load one-handed. I still got it."

“Shane!” Twilight growled.

~~~~~

A few band-aids were sufficient to cover the small thermal burns on the human's hand after a few skin samples were taken. The results of the preliminary tests were divisive to say the best. Magic could interact with earth objects sporadically, seeming to follow no discernable pattern.

Twilight could lift the human's shotgun, or his music player, but couldn't lift him. She could use magic to untie his boot but not remove it. Another unicorn was able to lift him but could not create a shield that could keep him out.

They collected a mountain of data, almost none of it made sense. One thing they very clearly established was that the human was not immune to magic, nor did he really negate it. It was more accurate to say he diverted it. Spells that seemed to work on his body or objects from his world, worked for some unicorns but not others. Implying that the issue was likely the spellcaster themselves.

The initial assumption was that it was merely a matter of power. Twilight being one of the more powerful unicorns on Equus was more successful than some of the medical ponies, and the Princesses seemed to have little trouble with simply manipulating either the human himself or his things. Cadance had lifted Shane onto Shining Armor's back when he passed out at the bar. Twilight recalled her doing so without much apparent effort.

It was at least a working theory. Twilight rolled her shoulders and sighed as she walked outside, her horn was sore. It wasn't even noon and she was already tired. Shane was out here somewhere smoking. Or he better be. She allowed him to go alone only if he promised to be back inside in ten minutes. A time limit he was currently pushing.

She found the human around the corner of the building a half-smoked forgotten cigarette in his left hand, his right tapping warily on the grip of the holstered pistol on his leg.

Twilight paused as she came around to see a lone griffon hen sitting next to the human. She had beautiful jet black feathers and ashen grey fur with little white spots on her chest and paws.. Her long tail curled around around her legs, occasionally twitching with excitement.

Alarms immediately went off in Twilight's mind. Who was this? What did she want? The unicorn slowly approached the pair. Almost immediately the griffon noticed her, locking her sharp golden eyes onto the mare. Shane didn't fail to notice the griffon's reaction. He turned and regarded Twilight for a moment, chewing on the inside of his cheek.

There was an awkward silence that lasted at most a few seconds but felt like an eternity. The griffon cleared her throat and turned her attention back to the human. "It was an honor to finally speak to you, Major. But I must take my leave. Until next time." Her voice was rich and exotic. She didn't sound like she was from Griffinstone, or anywhere in the Griffon kingdom for that matter..

Shane didn't answer her. The griffon lowered her head toward him. She looked back at the unicorn once more. "Lady Sparkle," was all that she offered as she inclined her head.

The griffon spread her wings as her powerful rear legs launched her into the air. In a few short flaps she was gone. Shane watched her go, working his jaw back and forth a few times like he was chewing.

"Shane?" Twilight came to his side. He sniffed and turned his attention to the cigarette in his hand. It had gone out. "Who was that?" She asked.

"I don't know," he said flicking the cigarette away.

"What did she want?"

"...I don't know." Shane repeated, pushing away from the side of the building. "Come on," he muttered. "Let's go back inside."

Shane made his way back to the entrance. Twilight cast one more

look at the sky, almost expecting to see her up there watching. But the skies were clear. Not even a cloud.

Twilight sighed and trotted after the biped. It seemed today would be another day of unanswered questions.

## **Author's Notes:**

Finally had a few days off to finish this.  
Now with with like 150% more sex jokes

I wish I could knock these out faster.  
Probably has lots of mistakes.  
I didn't edit it. It's late. I'm going to bed.

# ARTICLE 2 Part XXI

## ARTICLE 2

### PART XXI

“You want me to... act more alien?” Shane repeated through the unlit cigarette in his mouth. He turned around just enough so that Celestia could see the one cocked eyebrow.

Celestia shuffled on her throne. She wasn't really sure how to explain it in a way that would make sense to him. “In a way,” she clarified. “You seem to have a basic understanding of how you came to be here. Your spacecraft tore space-time and you have landed here...somehow.” She looked at the human for affirmation.

He nodded.

“Well you've seen Twilight or Luna teleport have you not?”

Again, he nodded.

“Trans-dimensional teleportation is not an unheard of concept for us. Theoretically speaking, if based on similarly crafted magics, it should be possible.”

“Trans-dimensional travel?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Shane hummed. “I'm sensing a *'but'* in there somewhere.”

“But,” she continued. “It has never been successfully accomplished. Without boring you with the history and details, when teleportation was discovered and refined many ponies attempted to then breach the confines of this reality by crossing dimensional barriers with magic.” Shane made a motion with his hands indicating her to continue. “Hundreds attempted it. History books downplay the actual results but to put it bluntly, most were killed or horrifically injured during the attempt. Either the spell fatally drained their

bodies of magic trying to fuel the jump or merely managing to botch teleportation spells and slinging half their bodies a mile away or in one particular case, just their internal organs..”

“Ouch...” Shane muttered rubbing his stomach.

“Indeed. Needless to say the practice was outlawed for a time only to be legally researched by very specific, *highly trained* individuals.”

The human cleared his throat. “You know, Princess, this is fascinating and all but... why are you telling me this again?”

“Major, we are perpetuating the falsehood that you are an alien from a very distant planet for a reason. We do not want the announcement of a trans-dimensional creature to rekindle an interest in an art that cost hundreds of lives in the past.”

“And that’s why you want me to act like an idiot,” he came full circle.

“That’s not what-”

“You already act like an idiot, Major.” Luna interrupted as she approached the throne, apparently having entered without either of them noticing. “We merely need you to act like a more specific breed of idiot. I am certain that is within your purview.”

Shane reached a hand down into the fountain he was sitting on and flung a handful of water at the lunar alicorn who yelped and hid behind her wings.

“I just preened these!” she cried in horror as she surveyed the moistened appendages.

“Go preen your sass mouth you blue-WHAARBBGGRRGBRLLGGRG-” was all that the human was able to finish as Luna lit her horn and shoved him back into the fountain in a tangle of flailing limbs and bubbles.

“LUNA! That’s enough!” Celestia shouted as she pulled the gasping human from the water by the scruff of his shirt. While he kicked and slashed wildly in Luna’s general direction with his bayonet

while dangling from Celestia's magic.

"I'M GONNA FUCKING CUT YOU! AND THEN I'M GONNA GO INTO YOUR ROOM AND TAKE A SHIT ON YOUR DESK, YOU GIANT BLUE PIGEON!"

**"ENOUGH!"** Celestia roared, already developing a headache from their bickering. Both Shane and Luna shrunk at the outburst. Luna's ears pressed against her skull as she hid once more behind her dripping wings as Shane somehow managed to curl into a ball and duck his head halfway into the soaking wet shirt from whence he hung.

"She-" Shane started to mutter through his shirt.

"I don't care if she started it!" Celestia interrupted angrily. "Be an adult. *BOTH OF YOU!*" she tagged on, giving Luna an evil glare. "Shane, stop reacting! Luna, stop escalating!"

Celestia set the human down next to her throne and conjured up several fluffy towels. Shane sheathed his bayonet and stripped out of his blouse, scowling at Luna the hole time.

Celestia continued while Shane wrung out his wet shirt, dabbing himself dry as best possible. "What I was *TRYING* to say, was that IF you went out in public I would consider it a great personal favor if you could occasionally throw in some general confusion about the way things work around here."

"Princess, you're all talking multicolored magical equines that can move the sun... I **AM** generally confused about how things work around here. I don't have to pretend."

"Well then try to be a bit more expressive about it then." Celestia groaned, exasperated.

"How bout I start by expressing my distaste for blue alicorns."

Luna paused re-preening her wings and stuck her tongue out at the biped, who presented his middle finger. She was beginning to understand the basic concept of the gesture.

Celestia rubbed her head. “Just think it over, Shane. Please?” she gave the human her most desperate puppy dog eyes.

Shane rolled his own at the sappy attempt, but relented nonetheless as he scrubbed himself with the towels. “Fine. I’m going into town today, so I’ll make sure to be absolutely baffled by everything equine.”

“Thank you...” she reshuffled her wings. “Wait...you’re going out where?” She exclaimed suddenly alarmed.

“Rarity said she would take me shopping today before I have to meet with Aegis,” he explained.

“I wasn’t aware of either of these things,” Celestia complained.

“I know you weren’t. I didn’t tell you.” Shane removed his boot, wringing water out of his socks.

“What are you even shopping for?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to see the city. I might try and see if I can get Rarity to buy me a soft pretzel,” he contemplated as he re-laced his boots.

“A soft pretzel?”

“Yeah you guys have those right?”

“Yes, we have those.” Celestia sighed.

Shane licked his teeth. “Or a burrito...spicy steak with sweet habanero sauce...” the human muttered to himself, swallowing thickly, lost as he was in his culinary thoughts.

“You have been back for two days and have still yet to meet with any of the nobles or house members requesting your attention. Not to mention the countless foreign dignitaries and reporters that are waiting to speak to you.”

Shane shook his blouse out, before tossing it aside, apparently deciding it was too wet to bother putting back on. “Feel free to tell



them to come find me. I'm not hiding. And feel free to also tell them that I don't come when summoned like a dog."

"They won't know where to find you if you keep making plans without telling me." Celestia frowned.

Shane made an exaggerated *Hmmmm* sound. "That does present a problem."

"You also haven't slept a wink since you came back from Whitetail woods." Luna interjected.

"You pay an unusual amount of attention to my sleep," he noted casting the alicorn a dubious glance. "Speaking of which, shouldn't you be asleep right now yourself there, little miss nocturnal?"

Luna ignored him. Moving closer to prod him in the best with the tip of her hoof. "It's not healthy."

"Blue is a stupid color," Shane retaliated.

"Shane..." Celestia warned.

Luna frowned. "We are merely concerned for your health. Perhaps we should re-dunk thee to ensure you do not fall asleep on your date with the element of Generosity."

"It's not a date and if you dunk me again and I'm gonna scalp all the pretty hair off your head," he assured, gesturing at Luna's astral mane with the tip of his bayonet.

"Aww, you really think my hair is pretty?" Luna placed a hoof on her chest, not bothering to suppress her smile.

Celestia groaned and rubbed her temples. "I'm done with this. Either kill each other or don't. I'm going to the kitchen for a slice of cake. Whoever's left alive, clean up after yourself. I have to reconvene court in twenty minutes." The alicorn disappeared in a flash of solar light.

The lunar alicorn and human exchanged uncertain looks in the following awkwardly silent room. Luna refolded her wings and

cleared her throat.

Shane pushed the bayonet back into its plastic scabbard on his belt as he pursed his lips and hummed. "It's not as fun when she's not here to yell..." he complained.

Luna cleared her throat. "Celestia ever was the more serene stoic. Seeing her so flustered of late is, we must admit, indeed somewhat amusing."

~~~~~

Shane leaned against the gate outside the palace entrance, cleaning his fingernails and smoking a cigarette. After a change of clothes he had forgone the blouse in favor of a breezier selection of skivvy shirt under his plate carrier. His rifle hung dutifully under his arm.

Luna trotted over, nudging the human with a wingtip to get his attention. "Major, I've assigned a few of the Solar Guard to escort you." She gestured to three celestial guardsponies, two pegasus mares and a unicorn stallion. "I have no doubt Ms. Rarity is a fine tour guide but you are a somewhat high-profile guest right now. You're quite likely to draw a crowd. We hope we do not need to remind you that not all of Equus' inhabitants are thrilled you are among us."

"Cocked and locked, head on a swivel.." he confirmed cockily biting at one of his fingernails. "I'll be sure to keep em' safe."

"They are there to protect YOU, Shane. I know you think think little of our species but there is more to fear out there than hoof or horn. Listen to them, they know this world and this city, you do not. If they tell you to do something. Do it."

"I get it, relax. It'll be fine," he droned at the princess like a begrudging teenager would his nagging mother.

"And get some sleep!"

"It's on my list of things to do. ....little hypocrite..." he murmured, blowing a piece of fuzz from his finger. Shane spit the smoldering cigarette butt on the ground, grinding it to death with the heel of

his boot before checking his watch and stretching lazily. “I’m beginning to think I’ve been stood up...” Shane noted somewhat amusedly as he scanned the courtyard, finding no trace of his unicorn escort.

Luna scoffed. “If we know anything of the element of Generosity, Major, it is that she is ever the fashionable one, including in her tardiness.”

“Sorry, darling!” came the voice of the posh unicorn as if summoned.

The mare wore a tasteful pink sundress, complete with an equally stylish sunhat and, in Luna’s opinion, overly large sunglasses.

“*Ms. Rarity*, don’t you look pretty,” Shane laughed at the approaching mare.

Rarity feigned herself taken aback, “Why, Major, if I didn’t know any better I would dare say you’re poking fun at me.”

“Not at all,” he assured still laughing. “I’ve just never seen a pony wear clothes. It’s infuriatingly adorable.” Shane made a spinning gesture.

“Why thank you, dear.” The unicorn obliged giving herself a twirl to show off her outfit. “Canterlot is a very fashion forward town after all. It wouldn’t do to make an appearance and pastels are in this year.”

Shane tsk’d. “I’m really more of a winter, myself. I’ve never been fond of pastel.” the human explained with a pleased grin. Luna wasn’t quite sure if he was being serious or just surreptitiously making fun of the unicorn.

“Of that, I am acutely aware, Major. I assure you.” Rarity confirmed. “I was actually rather fond of the darker uniform you wore the other day when you got back from your little camping trip.”

“I like them too, but deserts reflect more heat. Function over form today. You’ll have to forgive me.”

Rarity scoffed. "Think nothing of it darling. If anything I'll have to set some time aside to make you some casual attire. And I dare say I'm somewhat tempted to make some improvements upon your dress blues if you'd permit me."

"Oh I'd permit you to improve anything upon me," Shane winked at the unicorn.

"Shameless, Major." Rarity smiled through a faint blush. "Or are you simply using me to make another alicorn jealous now?" she nodded her horn toward the Princess.

"Ooh, good question. Hey, Luna, on a scale of one to ten, how jealous are you right now? Because I am prepared to flirt..." Shane thought for a moment, "...at least three times harder than this if need be."

Luna rolled her eyes, as she turned. "You seem to be in good hooves, human. I shall see you this evening." Luna directed her attention to Rarity. "Do be careful, and try to have him back by noon. He is supposed to meet the guard commander and I'd hate for him to be late."

"Not a moment later, your highness." Rarity bowed.

"Very good. We shall see the two of you later then. Farewell for now." Luna turned and headed back toward the castle.

"Do try to get some rest, Princess. It's not healthy to stay awake for long periods of time," Shane called after her with a sour smile.

Luna had to physically bite her tongue to prevent her retort from escaping. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Shane's smile only fell a little. Rarity had the good sense not to comment on it.

"Are you ready, Major? We're picking up Twilight at her brother's townhouse in an hour. I hope you don't mind."

Shane seemed to brighten. "Shining Armor *would* have a *townhouse*, wouldn't he." The human shook his head. "Fuckin' tool."

“Shall we then?”

The human gestured toward the city. “Lead the way.”

Rarity pranced in place and giggled. “Splendid. This will be fun.”

Shane smiled at the little unicorns excitement as he began to follow her into the city proper. “Hey I been meaning to ask, can you cut hair?”

~~~~~

Cadance’s eyes roamed over the mostly empty room. It used to be Shiny’s office. She supposed it still was technically. There was a desk, reading lamp, plush chair. All the makings of a comfortable quiet workplace. When they moved to the Crystal Empire the majority of her husband’s belongings went with them. The townhouse was a family heirloom of sorts, originally belonging to Shining’s great uncle.

The Sparkle family was one of Canterlots oldest noble families. It wasn’t uncommon for nobles to bequeath their estates to a deserving relative. Night Light was a distinguished servant of the crown long before Shining was ever a twinkle in his eye. Even Cadance wasn’t entirely clear on what Night’s job was while he was still working for Celestia. There were rumors, whispers, really. Cadance did her best to stay objective when it came to her father-in-law’s past. Whatever it was it earned him a noticeably early retirement, which he seemed to be enjoying immensely.

The townhouse would stay in the family despite its frequently unoccupied status. They could just stay in the castle of course whenever in Canterlot. But it was nice to have a home away from home. Somewhere private. Just the two of them.

*Three of them.*

Her mind reminded. She reflexively held a hoof against her stomach, feeling butterflies fill her chest.

“Cadance?” Twilight’s voice from the doorway shook her from her thoughts, causing her to jump.

The alicorn of love turned toward her sister-in-law, smiling apologetically. "Sorry, Twilight, you caught me daydreaming."

Twilight laughed, looking around the mostly empty room. "Things sure have changed, haven't they?"

Cadance laughed at Twilight's eerily accurate prediction of Cadance's thoughts. "You can say that again."

"Are you alright? Shining said you weren't feeling well this morning." Twilight asked looking the alicorn up and down with thinly veiled worry.

Cadance's feathers rustled. "Oh I'm fine, just ate something that didn't agree with me, I think."

"Good," Twilight smiled. "Wanna come out with me and Rarity? We're gonna show the human around town." Twilight offered. "It's something to do if you're looking for a distraction."

Cadance thought for a minute. Shiny was at the castle and wasn't due back until tonight. It might do her good to get out of the house and off her maternal thoughts. "I'd like that," she agreed.

~~~~~

"You know I've noticed something," Shane started. "...and don't take this the wrong way," Shane stipulated to the unicorn at his side.

"I'll do my best, darling, but I really can't promise anything until you tell me." Rarity warned over the rim of her sunglasses.

"At first I admittedly thought I was just having a difficult time distinguishing the males from the female ponies..." Rarity pursed her lips, unable to help but feeling a twinge of offense. "But now I think that's not actually the case. And I seem to notice that there is genuinely a pointed lack of male representation in this city." Shane said casting a critical glance around the street full of ponies giving the duo a wide wide-eyed berth. The human's presence was anything but secret at this point. Few enough expected him to be literally walking amongst them so soon though. "Or am I wrong? I

haven't exactly been checking the plumbing on every pony I pass."

Rarity hummed. "You're not wrong. But it's a fairly average ratio compared to most cities I've been in. The ratio of male to female foals in Equestria is about one male to three females if memory serves." Rarity did her best to recall the results of the latest census.

Shane scoffed. "Well that's JUST my luck."

"Whatever do you mean, dear?"

Shane laughed again, "That I'd be stranded on a planet of predominantly females only to find all the females are fuzzy quadrupeds. It's kinda like that one episode of the Twilight Zone, only instead of books and glasses it about horse vaginas and my labido."

"Twilight Zone?" Rarity asked, eyeballing the crowd and chuckling awkwardly hoping none of the surrounding ponies heard the alien mention his reproductive disappointments.

"It was a television show in the early nineteen-sixties about a bunch of little twisty stories and thought experiments."

"...television?"

Shane deflated. "Nevermind. The payoff isn't honestly worth the explanation-" The human stopped in his tracks, gasping and nearly causing one of his guards to collide with one another. "Rarity..." he said as if he's seen an apparition.

"What's wrong, darling?" She asked suddenly concerned.

"What's that?" he asked pointing fatally at a small stand on the street corner.

Rarity followed the human's finger. "I do believe that would be a hot-dog stand, Major."

Shane's jaw dropped as he inhaled in the slowest gasp Rarity had ever heard.

The diminutive earth pony mare behind the stand seemed suddenly all too aware of the vast attention. Not only was the alien from the newspapers giving her stand the widest most gobsmacked stare she had ever received from any living creature. The surrounding crowd, all too aware as they were of the alien intruder seemed to follow his gaze to the small purveyor of street foods.

She did the only thing she could really think to do in this situation and dove headfirst under her stand and curled up into the tightest ball she could possibly manage.

Rarity was the first to break the silence. "Major, would you like a hot dog?"

"I don't have any horse money," he said still somberly looking at the stand.

The unicorn chuckled. "You know, considering I'm the one who invited you out, I could probably be persuaded into paying for you, dear."

"Well, at the risk of sounding easy, if you were to buy me a hot dog with spicy brown mustard, onion sauce, and relish, I would be tempted to kiss you square on the lips."

Rarity laughed again. "Be careful, Major. You may be a stallion but you'll find I wrote the book on flirting to get what I want," the unicorn teased as she approached the stand.

The small earth pony poked her head out from under her cart after what felt like an appropriate amount of hiding in terror from aliens.

"Hello, Darling!"

The mare yelped and dove back under the cart. Rarity rolled her eyes, suddenly remembering the years of dealing with Fluttershy's panic attacks

"Terribly sorry dear, but could I trouble you for a hot dog?"

The mare opened one eye to find a stylish unicorn poking her head under the cart. "A hot-" she began, seeming to find her voice.



Rarity looked back at the human who was shifting his weight from foot to foot in some kind of anticipatory dance. "He's harmless, darling. I promise. Just hungry."

"He...wants to eat here?" She asked her confusion slowly replacing her fear.

Rarity didn't pretend to understand it any more than she did. "So it would seem. One hot-dog please."

The mare crawled out from under her cart and began to tentatively make the unicorns requested snack. "Um...does he want any... fixin's?" she cast a tentative glance at the alien, who's dancing had only seemed to increase in speed and intensity now that he saw the pony preparing the desired treat.

"Relish, mustard, and onion sauce," Rarity repeated.

The small earth pony completed the dog and placed it in a paper tray, hoofing it over to the unicorn. Rarity deposited two bits in the jar on her stand. "Thank you, darling."

Rarity handed the hot dog over to the human. Who oooohed appreciatively.

"You're a gem, Rarity. Don't let anyone tell you different. You want your kiss french or standard?"

Rarity laughed. Keep your kisses, Major. I've not yet sunk to the point where I need to trade food for affection. This one's on me."

"Suit yourself." He inspected the snack with wide hungry eyes as he practically drooled on himself. All eyes were on him as he took an enormous bite.

*\*crunch\**

He froze at the unexpected noise. Visible confusion on his face.

Hot-dogs weren't supposed to crunch.

He looked at the food in his hands, then back to the small pony

behind the stand, who ducked a little bit.

He chewed once, producing another muffled crunch. And inspected the hot dog once again.

“What’s wrong, dear?” Rarity asked acutely aware of the stares of the crowd and Shane’s bewildered look.

Shane took a minute to shift the food around in his mouth to answer.

“This is a carrot,” he said plainly.

“Yes, Major. That’s what a hot dog is. A steamed carrot in a bun.”

Shane looked like he was about to cry.

“Do you... not want it?” she asked hoping to console the human.

Shane looked at the not-hot-dog, considering it for a moment. “No it’s still pretty good.” He took another crunchy bite.

~~~~~

After a few blocks, Shane had calmed down somewhat from his hot-dog incident. Word had apparently gotten out about the human roaming the city with the Element of Generosity and more than a few curious citizens had taken to following the duo around. Some of the bolder ones even going as far as to take pictures or shout their curiosities at the pair. Shane would either deflect, answer vaguely, or simply ignore the majority of them.

They passed a mare carrying her foal on her back.

Shane gasped at seeing the foal. “Awwww... look how small it is, Rarity.”

“I see her, Major.” Rarity couldn’t help but smile at the human’s delight.

The filly gasped back at the tall biped. “Mommy! Wook its da awien!” The mare gently admonished her for staring before moving

along.

Shane clasped a hand over his mouth. "Oh my god, she can't pronounce L's. I don't know if I can handle this. Rarity, look. She's just riding on her moms back."

"Yes Shane, I see her." she repeated. "It's very cute. We do need to keep moving though, we're running late."

"If I see an unattended pony baby, I'm taking it."

"Please don't." Rarity was pretty sure he was kidding but didn't need to take that risk.

"This place is neat, it kind of reminds me of a more cartoonish Prague." Shane commented looking around the city as they walked. "Do you live here?"

"Oh my, no. I live in Ponyville with Twilight and the girls. I've got a small business down there. I'd like to open up another up here some day but I don't think I could live here. Wonderful city, but Ponyville is my home. I'd hate to be so far away from my family."

"I'm gonna come back to mock the fact that you named the town, "Ponyville" later but for the sake of continuity of conversation, what's stopping you from opening up a shop here and having someone else run it?"

Rarity sighed, "The same things that stop any small business owner, I suppose. It's a lot of work. You need to scout locations, hire help, file the proper paperwork, pay the taxes. And not to mention that you still need to create and deliver a product that will sell. Which, in of itself, is a full time job. You need to research designs, trying to predict what will be in style, advertise different lines, and then do it all over the next season." She adjusted her sun hat. "I'm afraid I've got my hooves full as it is," she finalized. "One day I'll find the time and ambition but for now I've got enough on my plate."

"I know the feeling," Shane sympathized, as he lit a cigarette.

"Here we are, dear," Rarity announced as they came upon the front of Shining Armor's townhouse.

Shane Pfffttt'd at the building. "He fucking *would* have his ass-mark carved into the door."

"Cutiemark, Major." The unicorn corrected as she approached the door where two of Cadance's Crystal guards stood vigilant. "Hello, we're here to pick up Twilight Sparkle. I'm Rarity Belle, we're expected."

The crystal guard looked over at the human with poorly concealed disdain.

"And who's he?"

"I'm fucking Santa Claus. Go tell Twilight we're here."

"No entry without proper identification," the guard frowned.

"How many other bipedal aliens you got running around this bitch?" Shane asked condescendingly.

"Shane!" Twilight poked her head out of an open second story window. "Stop antagonizing Cadance's guards. Hi, Rarity! I love your dress!" the purple unicorn waved animatedly to the white unicorn below.

"Hello, darling! And thank you!"

"Twilight, get your purple butt down here, before I eat this glossy pony," Shane demanded, pointing at the Crystal guard who was literally just doing his job.

"We're still getting ready. Come on in. I'll be down in a sec."

The guard stepped aside, letting Rarity into the townhouse. Shane followed close behind after putting his cigarette out in one of Shining Armors potted plants.

~~~~~

Shane wandered his way upstairs the mostly empty townhouse. Rarity and Twilight were still downstairs in the kitchen talking about whatever young twenty-something mares talked about.

He found the Alicorn of Love, giving the wall of Shining Armor's office a thousand-yard stare. As far as he could tell she hadn't heard him approach. She just stared at the wall, lost in her own little world.

Shane audibly cleared his throat. Cadance turned to see him leaning against the doorframe. He cocked an eyebrow at the alicorn. Asking without asking.

Cadance blinked a few times, still struggling to control the sudden flood of emotions in her brain. "I was just thinking about how this room would make a good nursery," she squeaked. Sudden tears fell from her eyes as she spilled the words. She wasn't even sure why she was crying. She just couldn't help it. Her lip quivered as she tried to suppress the sudden flow of teardrops.

"You know this is just hormones right?" he asked sighing at the sobbing pink pony with a tired kind of sympathy.

Cadance nodded, blinking moisture out of her eyes and fanning herself dramatically with her wings and hooves. "I know, but I can't help it!" She took a few deep breaths but a few sobs still broke through.

Shane looked back out the hallway to ensure the coast was still clear. "Well you better pull it together, hun, because I can't exactly cover for you if someone sees this."

Cadance sniffed again, nodding, but it seemed like the harder she tried to stop the stronger the sobs became.

"Come on, babe. Wrap it up." Shane encouraged, anxiously looking over his shoulder. He suddenly cocked his head to the side grinning. "Although if you two were good at *'wrapping it up'* I suppose you wouldn't be in this situation to begin with." He then made the ba dum tss noise along with subsequent drumming motion.

"You're not helping!" she glared through her tears.

"Shhh!" he winced again at the alicorn's volume. "I don't know what you expect me to do about it! Get it under control!" he replied

in a hushed shout.

Cadance took several measured sobbing breaths. "I want a hug," she decided.

"I'm not hugging you." the human frowned. "Just stop being emotional."

"I can't just *stop* emotions!"

"Yes you can. It easy. I do it all the time."

She fell on her rump and opened her forelegs, still sniffing and still requesting an embrace.

"No!" he refused again. "Lady, you have a fucking husband. Make him do this!"

"He isn't here and I'm sad!"

"You're not sad. You're stressed and hormonal. Get it together."

"You don't knooow what it's liiiike!" she wailed.

Shane winced at the noise checking the hallway again. "Jesus fucking Christ, okay! Fine. Fine!" He stepped inside the office and closed the door behind him urgently before the alicorn's cries reached the mares downstairs. He came down on a knee and beckoned the alicorn. "C'mon, hurry up."

Cadance didn't hesitate to crash into the biped, burying her face in between his neck and his shoulder. He may have been a killer alien but at the time he was also her only confidant. He wrapped his arms around her and gently stroked the fur on the back of her neck.

"You're okay," he cooed comfortingly if not somewhat urgently. He maneuvered his head around her horn doing his best to not get an eye poked out. He ran his free hand over her mane and neck soothingly as he whispered. "Shhhhhut the fuck up, shhhhhh. You're okay."

Cadance let out a choked sob. "What's wrong with me?"

Shane rocked the alicorn back and forth. “Nothing’s wrong with you. I know it’s confusing right now, but it’s just hormones. I promise, it’ll pass.” he squeezed the alicorn. “You’re okay,” he repeated. The human soothed the pink alicorn into a fitful little ball on the floor while pregnancy hormones ravaged her mind. It all felt like the whole world was crashing down around her. The weight of it was just too much. Surely it wasn’t this bad for other mares. Ponies had babies all the time. She couldn’t be the first one to go through this.

“Breathe, Cadance,” Shane reminded as she hiccuped out another sob. “Big deep breaths. Come on. You just need to keep it together for a few more hours, then you’re someone else’s problem.” Cadance laughed in a choked half sob. “Breathe,” he repeated as the alicorn slowly regained control of her outburst.

“You done?”

She nodded against his chest.

Shane set her back up on her hooves where she took several deep breaths.

Shane stood back up as well, frowning at the alicorn tears staining his shirt collar.

“Are you guys ready?” they heard Twilight shout up the stairs.

“Go to the bathroom and pull yourself together. I’ll buy you five minutes.” The human nudged the alicorns rump toward the door with his knee.

Cadance took another calming deep breath as she began to move before a thought stopped her. “Shane?” she turned back around. “Why are you helping me?”

The human blinked. He opened his mouth to reply but closed it again. There was a brief silence. He eventually frowned and opened the door to the office and gestured the alicorn out. “Five minutes.”

Cadance didn’t press the issue. It seemed perfectly clear the human didn’t really know himself. He probably didn’t like whatever

conclusion he came to in his own head.

She made her way to the bathroom to assess the damage to her hair and mascara.

It could have been worse, she decided, dabbing her cheeks with a towel. There was a loud crash from downstairs as Shane presumably created whatever distraction he needed to get the alicorn her promised five minutes. It was oddly endearing but she wondered idly what, of her husband's possessions she indirectly sacrificed for the time.

~~~~~

*~ One would hardly know it from speaking to him. The alien spoke as plainly to me as one might to any stranger on the street. Given Equus' vastly diverse species I must admit somewhat to my own embarrassment, having never seen the creature, I mistook him for some long forgotten native species ~*

The typewriter smacked letters upon the paper, forming words, forming sentences, with mechanical precision. But for the life of her the mare couldn't really describe the experience with any semblance of coherent thought.

Dandelion ripped the paper from the typewriter before crumbling it up in her hooves and discarding it upon the cafe table. She inserted a new blank sheet from her briefcase. Her editor back in Cloudsdale was expecting a complete story on the alien in just two days. And here she was, having spoken direct words to the creature and couldn't come up with a single page to say.

Truth be told she was having trouble coming to terms with the incident herself. Only a few days earlier she was inches away from an alien species and didn't even know it until he identified himself as such. If only she knew then she could have interviewed him then and there and retired off the commission.

She had played the conversation in her mind again and again. How the biped sat next to her as the Lunar Princess fielded questions about him. Her cheeks flushed somewhat with embarrassment as



she remembered the encounter. The alien must have been quite amused with himself, willfully withholding the truth from her. At the time she thought him a pleasant enough fellow. Only now realizing that he was likely toying with her for his own amusement.

She huffed exasperatedly. Stretching her wing and pulling her cappuccino a little closer. It was too nice to stay cooped up in her hotel and type up the story, so she had elected to sit outside at a little cafe a few blocks from where she was staying. Canterlot was a busy place, she often found inspiration from pony-watching. However, despite the heavy hoof-traffic the words eluded her today. Despite the increasingly loud commotion that seemed to be coming down the street.

Shouts and calls echoed off the marbled walls, causing the mare to look up from her spot, nearly spitting out her drink as she saw the human himself walking down the road with no other than the Empress of the Crystal Empire accompanied by Celestia's protegee and the element of generosity themselves.

Several Solar guards kept the bulk of the ponies away. There were several Canterlot natives along with what, she imagined, were dozens of members of the press and a few other species including griffons, minotaurs, and even what looked like a pair of abyssinians.

Her heart began to beat rapidly. This might be her chance. Would he remember her? He was getting closer, occasionally pointing at things and asking one of the mares in his retinue to explain what he was seeing.

"Major!" she shouted, buzzing her wings and standing on her chair.

The human looked over, cocking his head curiously at the call. He locked eyes with the mare as she waved animatedly. "It's me!" she exclaimed, hoping to jog his memory.

Sudden realization crossed his face as he began toward her, much to the confusion of his escorts. He came to a stop at the railing separating the cafe from the street. She gulped as she trotted over to meet him. She swallowed, somewhat apprehensive, as she remembered how big he was up close.

“Dandelion, wasn’t it?” he asked with a slightly smug smile. Kneeling down to be closer the pegasus’ level. “It’s been a few days. How’s your newspaper coming?”

“I seem to be suffering from a rare case of ‘writer’s block’.” she admitted. “You know, I’m a bit cross at you, for lying to me.”

“I didn’t lie. And also get in line. The queue of creatures I’m upsetting is pretty long.” Shane laughed. “But if it’s any comfort I’ll let you cut right in behind Celestia and Luna, Shining Armor, about half of the royal guard, a bunch of castle staff, several of this world religious leaders, apparently all of the zebras...”

“You’re making a lot of powerful enemies it seems.”

“I must have a natural talent for it. I’m really not even trying.”

“I’ve been thinking about what I’d say to you if we ever met again. I even rehearsed it in my hotel room a few times.”

The human nodded, and hummed amusedly. “Is it everything you imagined?”

“Not exactly,” she admitted, folding her ears.

“Shane? Who is this?” Twilight asked very confused by the human’s apparent familiarity with a random mare at a street cafe.

This is, Dee,” he introduced. “She’s a spy of some kind from Cloudville.”

“Dandelion,” she bowed as she introduced herself properly. “-Lady Sparkle. And I am a *reporter* from *CloudsDALE*,” she clarified extra loud for the human to hear. Who merely shrugged away the correction. “I became acquainted with the Major, at the Royal Summit. He sat next to me in the audience.”

“Ah... I’m sorry if he was a bother. He told me he was going to the bathroom and snuck off. Allow me to apologize on his behalf.” Twilight, lowered her head.

“Not at all,” the mare waved. “I’m honestly most upset that nopony

is going to believe the truth if I tell them. I'm trying to think of a way to write down what happened without being laughed out of my building when my editors read it."

"You could lie," Shane offered.

"I really can't think of any lies that are more ridiculous than the truth," she admitted, gesturing at her typewriter haplessly. "Besides I do have my journalistic integrity to consider."

"Sounds like an oxymoron to me," Shane mumbled to Twilight just loud enough for the reporter to hear.

Dandelion ignored the quip. "I will consider forgiving you for lying to me, however, if you agree to give me an exclusive interview."

"I did not LIE to you. I just sat down next to you and was willfully unspecific about my origins. I don't make a habit of randomly expositing my backstory to every stranger I encounter on the street." Shane clarified.

"Lies of omission are still lies." Dandelion frowned.

"So are you married or not?" Shane suddenly demanded.

The pegasus blushed at the sudden personal question. "W-what?!"

"Do you have a significant other? Boyfriend? Girlfriend? Just answer the question."

She stammered for a moment, looking to Twilight for some help. The unicorn just smiled knowingly and remained silent. "I'm recently out of a relationship if you must know," she admitted tucking her wings, cheeks somewhat flushed with a mix of embarrassment and anger.

"So, you lied to me." Shane stated suddenly again pulling the conversation right out from under the journalist.

"I did not! You never asked! Not that my love life is any of your business."

Shane made an over-exaggerated face of realization. "I thought lies of omission were still lies though? You didn't tell me you recently had your heart broken when we met. What is that if not an omission."

"It's irrelevant information that had no contextual pertinence to the situation, UNLIKE the information YOU withheld, for your own amusement." She fired back. "And I never said I had my *'heart broken'*! It was a mutual separation!"

Rarity and Cadance finally wandered over to investigate what was holding the two from their walk.

Shane motioned at the pair. "Rarity, Cadance, meet Dandelion. But be careful she was just brutally dumped and is still pretty beat up about it."

Dee flustered her feathers with embarrassment. There wasn't really an emotion to accurately describe what having your failed relationships explained to a literal Alicorn Empress by an actual alien was like.

Shane carried on with introductions regardless. "Dee, this is Cadance, Princess of Ice and Rarity who is both a seamstress and, from what I understand, some kind of state-sanctioned Power Ranger."

Dandelion continued to be flustered for several seconds before finding the wherewithal to bow to the alicorn princess. "Your majesty,"

Cadance waved hoof. "Oh please, that isn't necessary, but thank you. Please stand up. I'm sorry if the Major is bothering you. We can make him leave if you'd like to get back to work," she nodded toward the typewriter. "And um... I'm sorry to hear about your breakup?"

The pegasus sputtered. "It was mutual!" she assured desperately.

Cadance looked up at the human who shook his head and made a breaking heart gesture with his fingers.

“Thank you, your highness but I was actually trying to see if I could guilt him into an interview. I’m sorry if I interrupted your morning.”

“I don’t feel guilt, because I did nothing wrong,” Shane assured. “But if you buy me a drink I’ll give you until I finish it to interview me.”

“Done!” the pegasus exclaimed. She waved over the waiter who was luckily watching with rapt attention, as was everyone else sitting outside the cafe and a not insignificant crowd in the street. After all it wasn’t everyday you saw an alien, a princess, and two national heroines walk down the street.

Shane lifted his leg, stepping over the (to him) small railing separating the cafe’s sitting area from the general population. He sat in one of the miniscule chairs opposite the pegasus and her typewriter.

“Shane I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Twilight warned. “Celestia scheduled interviews for you already and you keep blowing them off. If she finds out you agreed to one with a random Cloudsdale agency she isn’t going to be happy.” Twilight turned to the pegasus. “No offense.”

“None taken,” she smiled.

“I know it’ll be hilarious,” Shane daydreamed.

The waiter approached somewhat hesitantly. “Your order, sir?”

“Tall draft beer, please.”

“It’s ten in the morning,” Twilight panned, frowning.

Shane spun around to glare at the unicorn. “Is it? Already? Wow time sure does fly,” he noted condescendingly before turning back to the waiter. “You better make that two beers.” The pony nodded before trotting back toward the kitchen. Shane folded his hands in his lap and cocked his head at the purple unicorn, silently daring her to comment further.

“Do you and Princess Celestia not get along?” Dandelion asked, not used to hearing anyone speak negatively about the well-beloved diarch.

“I like Celestia just fine. We do however have a tendency to disagree about how things should be done.”

“Such as?”

“Facilitating the public reveal of alien life to the population... just to name one off the top of my head,” Shane listed.

“You disapprove of how she’s handling it?”

The waiter deposited Shane’s drinks. She reached one and took cautionary sip. “Not really. I told everyone at the summit I have no interest in becoming involved in your politics and I meant it. So she has my blessing to handle it in whatever way she sees fit. Sometimes she asks for my advice and sometimes I give it. I don’t coach her what to say and she does her best not to do the same to me.”

“She does her best?”

“She’s the controlling type,” he added. “As I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“Princess Celestia has ruled us benevolently for thousands of years. She’s saved Equestria and the world itself on multiple occasions,” Dandelion retorted feeling somewhat defensive.

“So I’ve been told,” Shane nodded over the rim of his glass. “And I like Celestia. Don’t get me wrong. But I don’t trust her implicitly. And neither should you. Never trust an immortal on their word alone. Because that’s really all you have. Her promise that she acts in your best interest. And its worked out well so far so you’ve stopped questioning it.” Shane tilted his head back and finished his first beer. “I could be history’s greatest monster but eventually time will bring me to heel. A hundred years from now I’ll be dead and in the ground. And the world can heal from whatever I did during my short time on it. With her you don’t get that. She could be playing a long con that no one generation could ever piece together.”

“You think Celestia is a con-artist...” Dandelion panned disbelievingly.

Shane stopped mid sip and frowned. “You’re putting words in my mouth. All I said was that you can’t *know* that she’s not. ‘But let’s say you’re right and she’s a perfectly benevolent little sunflower. What if she manages to spawn a child who isn’t? Now you’ve got an all powerful alcorn demi-god who will live for centuries and you can do exactly fuck-all about it.”

“Princess Celestia would step in and stop them,” Dandelion remarked confidently.

“I think your dear Princess has no qualms about fighting dirty but do you really think she could fight her own family?”

“She stopped, Luna.”

Shane blinked. “...what?”

Twilight attempted to intervene. “Dandelion I don’t think-”

Shane silenced the unicorn with a hand. “Luna as in... *Princess Luna?*”

Realization washed over the pegasus’ face. “She didn’t tell you...”

“Celestia stopped Luna from doing what?” Shane asked, clearly beginning to understand there was something he’d been left out on.

“Shane,” Twilight interrupted. “This is really something that you should hear from them.”

Shane eyeballed the ponies dubiously. It seemed for a few moments he was going to press the issue. “Fine.” he knocked back half of his second beer. “I’ll ask her myself.”

Dandelion shifted uncomfortably. She had the sinking feeling she had just facilitated a very uncomfortable situation for her Princesses. “Well,” she attempted to change the subject. “I don’t think you have to worry about the Princess having an evil child. Neither Celestia or Luna have ever birthed an heir that history

knows about at least. Most ponies think alicorns can't actually get pregnant."

"Sure they can," Shane dismissed casually over his drink.

Dandelion grinned. "And you, the alien from deep space, would know that... how?"

"Because-" Shane's eyes widened and froze in place. His eyes flicked over to Cadance who was glaring at him hard enough to make a boulder shiver with fear. "Becauuussee...." he continued to stall. "It's... just common deep space alien knowledge." Shane nodded. "Your small primitive pony minds would not understand," he waved.

"That sounds like a lie."

"It's not a lie, it's an evasion. But you're entitled to your opinion. I have to go." He drowned the last of his beer and stood.

"But I didn't actually get an interview. We just talked about Princess Celestia the whole time," she complained.

"I finished my drink. That was the deal. If you're bad at time-management, that's on you." He stepped back over the railing and rejoined the mares on the other side. Princess Cadance still glaring at the human for his nearly spilled beans and subsequent less-than-stellar recovery.

"Good luck with your paper. If I don't like what you print I'm gonna eat your family," he added casually as he waved as he left.

"Stop threatening to eat ponies, Shane. It's bad for your image," Twilight scolded once again. Twilight turned and waved sheepishly. "He doesn't mean it," she promised. "It was nice meeting you, Dandelion." The unicorn trotted off catching up with the group.

"...you too," she muttered.

~~~~~



## Author's Notes:

Alight boys and girls.

I am now a civilian. And I have been bouncing around the world for the past year drinking lots and generally doing hood rat shit. I am now back. I went on a fhishing trip it was a good time.

This was supposed ot be much longer. But I am super drunk rn.

If there are errors feel free to point them out, sober me will cotrrect them eventuall.

Before this gets any worse, just know that i WILL finish this story if it kills me.

The next chapter is going to be short. It was going to be part if this chapter but I hanged my mind because I like to end chappers on dramatic phrases.

deuces